やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

□true
or
☑false

GAGAGA

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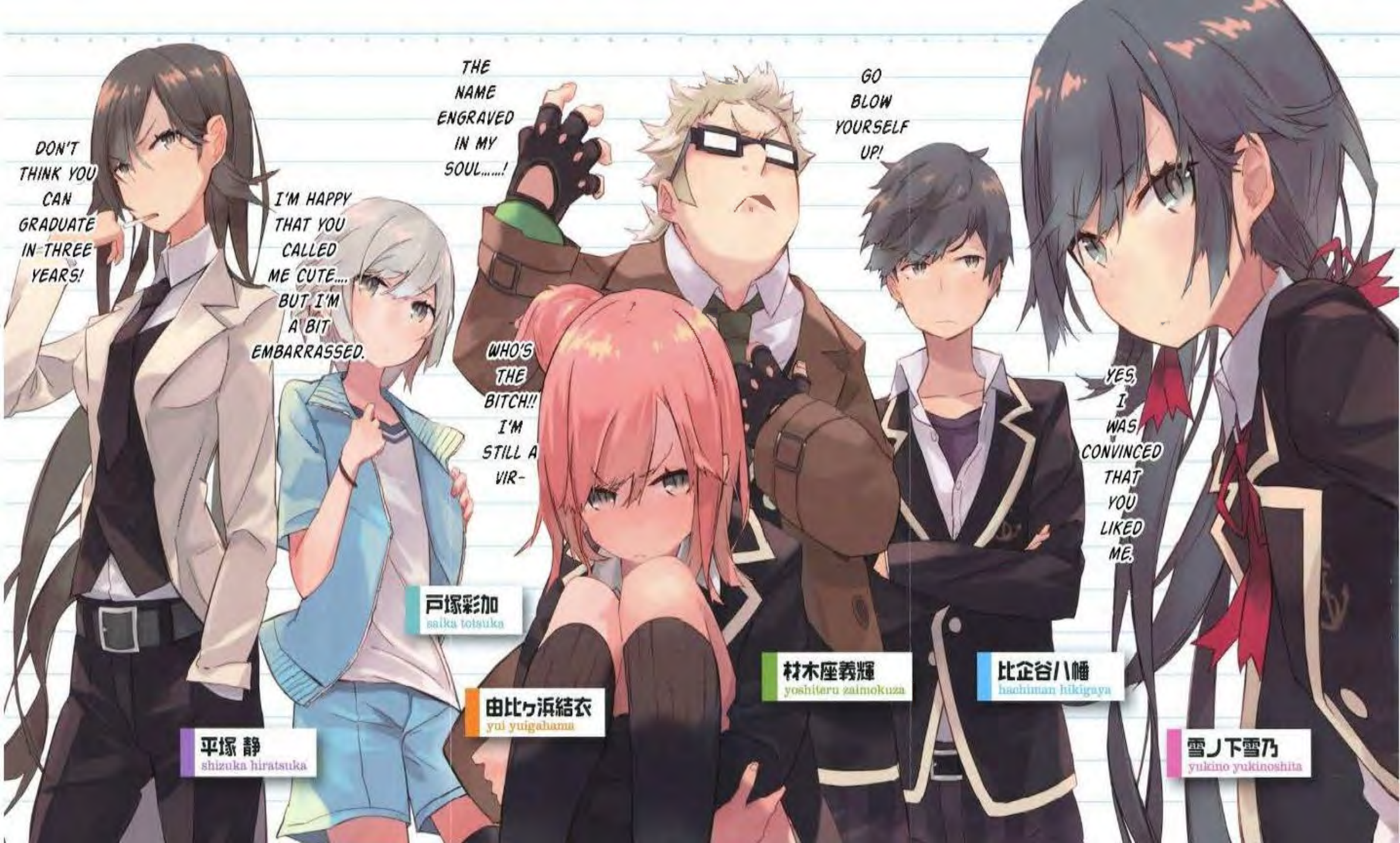
YES, I WAS CONVINCED THAT YOU LIKED ME.
雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita
GO BLOW YOURSELF UP!
比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya
THE NAME ENGRAVED IN MY SOUL......!
材木座義輝
yoshiteru zaimokuza
WHO'S THE BITCH!! I'M STILL A VIR-
由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama
I'M HAPPY THAT YOU CALLED ME CUTE.... BUT I'M A BIT EMBARRASSED.
戸塚彩加
saika totsuka
DON'T THINK YOU CAN GRADUATE IN THREE YEARS!
平塚 静
shizuka hiratsuka

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

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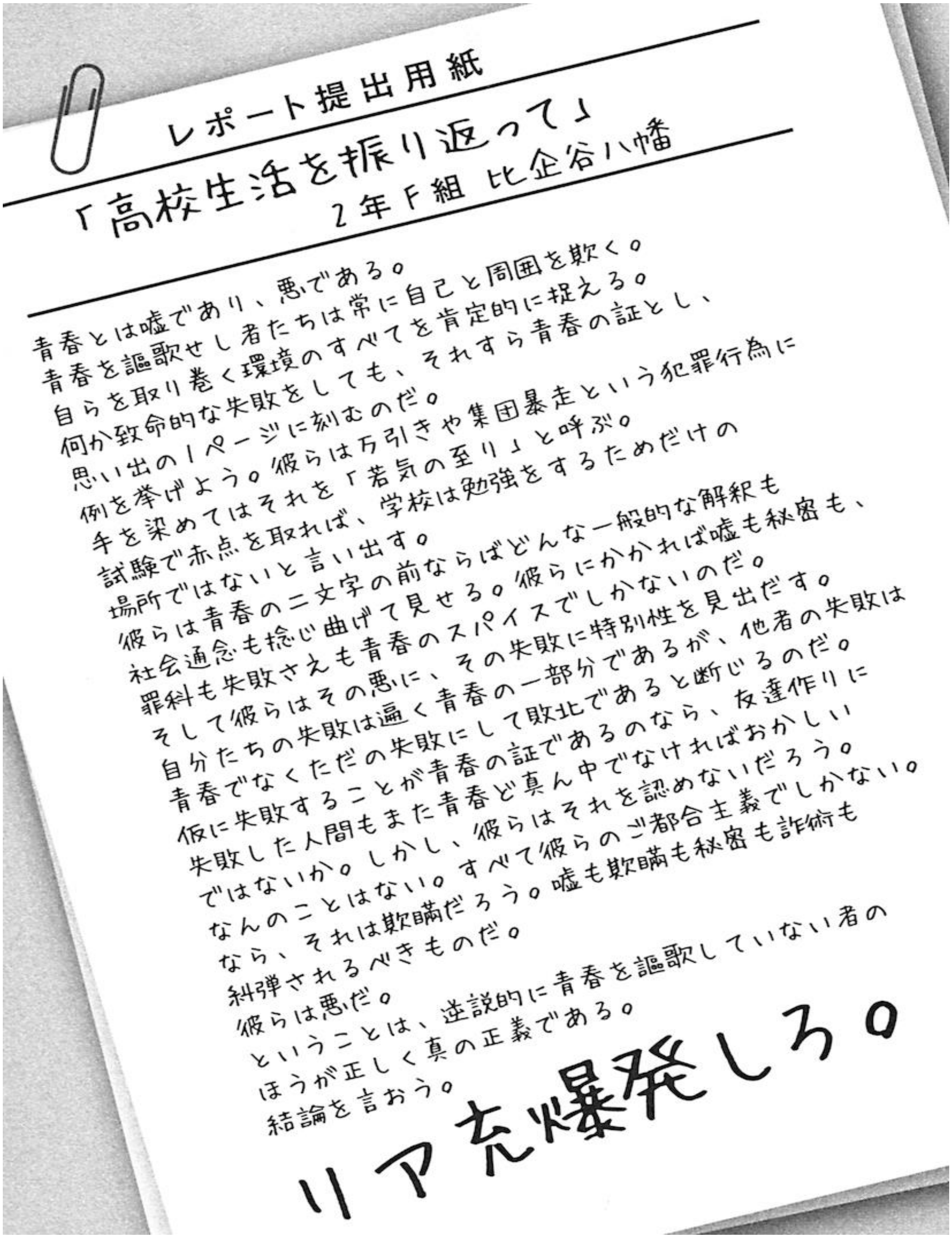
やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。



レポート提出用紙

「高校生活を振り返って」
2年F組 比企谷八幡

青春とは嘘であり、悪である。
青春を謳歌せし者たちは常に自己と周囲を欺く。
自らを取り巻く環境のすべてを肯定的に捉える。
何か致命的な失敗をしても、それすら青春の証とし、
思い出の1ページに刻むのだ。
例を挙げよう。彼らは万引きや集団暴走という犯罪行為に
手を染めてはそれを「若気の至り」と呼ぶ。
試験で赤点を取れば、学校は勉強をするためだけの
場所ではないと言い出す。
彼らは青春の二文字の前ならばどんな一般的な解釈も
社会通念も捻じ曲げて見せる。彼らにかかれば嘘も秘密も、
罪科も失敗さえも青春のスパイスでしかないのだ。
そして彼らはその悪に、その失敗に特別性を見出だす。
自分たちの失敗は遍く青春の一部分であるが、他者の失敗は
青春でなくただの失敗にして敗北であると断じるのだ。
仮に失敗することが青春の証であるのなら、友達作りに
失敗した人間もまた青春ど真ん中でなければおかしい
ではないか。しかし、彼らはそれを認めないだろう。
なんのことはない。すべて彼らのご都合主義でしかない。
なら、それは欺瞞だろう。嘘も欺瞞も秘密も詐術も
糾弾されるべきものだ。
彼らは悪だ。
ということは、逆説的に青春を謳歌していない者の
ほうが正しく真の正義である。
結論を言おう。

リア充爆発しろ。

Looking Back On High School Life
Hikigaya Hachiman
Grade 11, Class F

Prologue

Youth is a lie. It is nothing but evil.

Those of you, who rejoice in youth, are perpetually deceiving yourselves and those around you. You perceive everything about the reality surrounding you in a positive light. Even if you make a life-threatening mistake, it would still be seen as proof of your youth- etched into a single page of your recollections.

I'll give you an example. If such people are to dabble in criminal acts such as shoplifting or mass rioting, it would be called 'youthful indiscretion'. If they fail an exam, they would claim that school is not only a place for studying. So long as they are in the face of 'youth', they'll be showcasing a distortion of any commonly held beliefs or social norms.

Under their discretion, lies, secrets, crimes and even failure are nothing but the spice of one's youth. And in their corrupt ways, they discover something peculiar about failure. They conclude that while their own failures are generally a part of relishing in youth, others' failures should be shot down as just failures and nothing more.

If failure could be seen as proof of one's youth, wouldn't it be strange not to consider those who fail to make friends as experiencing the height of their youth? Of course, *they* wouldn't acknowledge it.

It amounts to nothing. The whole thing is nothing but a result of their opportunism. Therefore, it is a sham. Full of lies, deception, secrets and fraud that ought to be condemned.

They are evil.

That is to say, ironic as it is, those who do not glorify their youth are the truly righteous ones.

In conclusion, Riajuu[1], go blow yourselves up.

---

[1] A reference to the Japanese Internet meme - Riajuu, bakuhatsu shirou! - based on a vocaloid song sung by Hatsune Miku. It is used to refer to someone who has a good life, a boyfriend or girlfriend and are popular with his or her peers. It is typically used by otaku.

Chapter 1: In any case, Hikigaya Hachiman is corrupt

My Japanese teacher, Shizuka Hiratsuka, popped a vein as she read my essay aloud. As I listened, I realized that my writing skills were far from proficient. I thought I might seem smart if I strung some fancy words together, but it just came off like a cheap tactic some struggling writer would think of.

That said- is my amateurish essay the reason she called me? That couldn't be it. I knew that already. After Hiratsuka sensei had finished reading, she put a hand on her forehead and sighed deeply.

"Say, Hikigaya, what was the assignment that I handed out during class?"

"……well, it was an essay with the topic ‘Looking Back on High School Life’."

"Exactly. So then why did you write a threat letter[1]? Are you a terrorist? Or perhaps, an idiot?"

She let out another sigh and pulled a hand through her hair, vexed[2].

---

[1] The original word used here is ‘hankouseimei’, which is the same as a claim of responsibility (for a crime), but that sounded too hefty in English.

[2] The Japanese word for ‘vex’ (nayamashi) can also mean ‘seductive’, which leads him to his next thought…

Now that I think about it, using the word mistress instead of 'female teacher' makes it sound more erotic[3]. Then, just as I was grinning to myself while thinking about those things, a bundle of paper struck my head.

"Pay attention!"

"Yes."

"Your eyes, they’re like the eyes of a rotting fish."

"Do they really seem that rich in omega-3? Makes me sound smart."

The corners of her mouth twitched upwards.

"Hikigaya. What is with this tasteless essay? I'd at least like to hear some sort of reason." Her eyes flashed, shooting daggers at me, with a scowl deadly enough to make a sound. Only a woman cursed by beauty was capable of an expression so alarmingly powerful that it would unwillingly draw you in and completely overwhelm you. That is to say, it was seriously scary.

"Uh-Well-I...did reflect on high school life, didn't I? Nowadays this is exceedingly what high school life is like, you know! My essay is pretty close to it!"

---

[3] The original Japanese dictates that the kanji for female teacher (女教師) would be more erotic if it were read as ‘onnakyoushi’ (woman teacher) instead of ‘jokyoushi’ (female teacher).

I kept fumbling my words. I get nervous just by talking to people, but talking to an older woman made me all the more nervous.

"Usually, such a question would require you to reflect on your own experiences, don't you think?"

"Then please preface the question by saying so. If you'd done that, I would have written the essay accordingly. Isn't it your fault for writing a misleading question, sensei?"

"Oh stop being so pedantic, kid."

"Kid……? Well certainly from the perspective of someone your age, I am a kid, I guess."

There was a gush of wind. It was a fist. A fist that was unleashed without any indication of movement. And if that weren't enough, it was an impressive fist that just grazed the side of my cheek.

"The next one won't miss." Her eyes were serious.

"I'm very sorry. I'll write it over." To show some semblance of remorse and regret, I'll have to choose my words wisely. But right now, of all things Hiratsuka sensei was, satisfied was not one of them. It seemed there was no other way but to kneel down and bow at her feet.

I attempted to brush the creases out of my pants, and as I neatened them, my right leg bent down and became affixed to the floor. A flawless and swift movement.

"You know, I'm not angry with you."

……Oh, so it's come to that. That annoying thing they always do. The 'I'm not angry, so please tell me' thing. I've never seen someone who says that *not* get angry. Surprisingly, though, she really wasn't angry. Well, excluding the moment I mentioned her age.

I furtively observed her reaction as I lifted my right knee off the floor.

From a breast pocket that was on the verge of bursting, Hiratsuka sensei pulled out a Seven Stars[4] and tapped its filter hard against her desk. Just like how some old guy would do. After packing the tobacco, she clicked a 100-yen lighter and lit her cigarette. She took a drag and considered me with a serious look on her face.

"You're not in any clubs, right?"

"Right."

"……Do you have any friends?"

---

[4] A brand of cigarettes in Japan

She asked me like she had already assumed I didn't have any.

"Well, I- I'll have you know that I live by the virtue of impartiality, and as such, am unable to have particularly intimate relationships with people!"

"In other words, you don’t have any, right?"

"W-well, basically…"

As though she knew how I would reply, Hiratsuka sensei's face brimmed with excitement.

"So that's how it is! You really don't have any friends! Exactly as I had diagnosed. Just one look at those lifeless eyes and I knew straight away!"

So you figured it out just by looking at my eyes? Then, don't bother asking me.

She nodded her head knowingly with a 'mhmm...yes' and considered me with a reserved expression.

"…………What about a girlfriend or something?"

What's with the 'something'? What would you do if I said I had a boyfriend?

"Well I don't have one right *now...*"

Considering any hopes for the future, I emphasised ‘now’, just in case.

"I see......"

This time she gazed at me intensely, with misty eyes. I really hoped it was because of the cigarette smoke irritating her eyes.

Hey, stop that. Don't pity me with that soft gaze.

In any case, where are all these questions going? Is Hiratsuka sensei one of those enthusiastic teachers?

Is she going to be talking about how I'm that one rotten apple that spoils the barrel, soon?

Perhaps she was once a delinquent high school drop out, who's now going to go back to her old high school to be a teacher?[5]......Seriously, can’t she just go back there?

---

[5] Reference to the drama *Drop-out teacher returns to school* (Yankee Bokou ni Kaeru), in which a former gang member returns to his old high school as a teacher. He’s an enthusiastic teacher who tries to help students graduate out into the world.

After some consideration, Hiratsuka sensei sighed as she exhaled a puff of smoke.

"All right, let's do it this way. Rewrite your report."

"Yes."

And I definitely will.

All right, this time I'll write a highly appropriate, inoffensive composition. Much like the blogs of gravure idols and voice actresses.

Something like: *Today's dinner was like……, curry!*

What's with using 'like'? There's nothing about that word that adds to the surprise of eating curry.

Up until this point everything had gone as I expected. But what followed this was more than I had imagined.

"However, the fact remains that your heartless words and behavior have hurt my feelings. Were you never taught not to talk to a woman about her age? As a result, you are required to join the service club. After all, wrongdoings must be punished."

She didn't seem very hurt, so much so that she sounded commanding. Rather, she was more perky than usual, speaking in a cheerful manner.

In saying that, the word perky[6] inadvertently reminds me of something else……my eyes averted from reality and ended up settling on sensei's breasts pushing up from underneath her blouse.

Despicable……But then, what kind of person delights in handing out punishments?

"The service club……What do you suppose I do there?" I timidly inquired. I get the feeling they could quite possibly ask me to clean out the gutter or even worse, kidnap people.

"Just follow me."

Hiratsuka sensei pressed the end of her cigarette onto a densely filled ashtray and stood up. While I stayed rooted to the spot having had no explanation or introduction to what she was proposing, sensei was already at the door, looking back at me.

"Oi, hurry up."

With my brows knitted and a scowl on my face, I followed her.

---

[6] (6) The word for perky in Japanese is 'kiki' which rhymes with 'chichi', meaning breast (This guy is such an idiot).

1-2

The school building at Chiba Municipal Soubu High School has a slightly irregular shape. If you look down at it from above, it looks just like the kanji for mouth （口） and a lot like the katakana for （ロ）. Add the little audio-visual building at the bottom, and it would complete the bird’s eye view of our school. The building that contains the classrooms is on the side of the road and lies opposite to the special building. A passageway on the second floor links the two buildings, forming the square shape.

The space enclosed by the school building in all four directions is the holy courtyard for the riajuu[1]. During lunchtime, both boys and girls eat lunch there together. Then, they play badminton to help digest. After school, with the last light of the sunset on the school building as a backdrop, they talk about love and watch the stars as a salty sea breeze blows over them.

Are you kidding me?

From an outsider’s perspective, it looks like they’re actors in a youth drama trying their best to play their respective roles. The thought can only make me shudder. In such a drama, I’d probably play the ‘tree’ or something.

As Hiratsuka sensei click-clacked on the linoleum floor, it seemed as though she was headed toward the special building.

I have a bad feeling about this.

---

[1] Refer to the prologue.

For starters, something called the 'service club' can't be any good. The word 'service' here wouldn't be used in an everyday situation; rather the use of this term would only be permitted in a *restrictive* sense. Like, for example, when referring to the kind of service a *maid* provides for her *master*[2]. If it was this kind of 'service', it'd be a real turn on and you'd really want to go 'Letsu Party!'[3].

But in reality, such a thing wouldn't happen. No, actually, if you pay a set price it would be possible. And if money can buy anything you want, even this kind of thing, then I don't have any dreams or aspirations in such a rotten world. In any case, 'service' isn't something good.

What's more, we had already reached the special building. I'll definitely have to do stuff like move the piano from the music room, clean out the raw scraps from the biology lab or sort out the books in the library or something along those lines. In that case, I'll have to take precautions in advance.

“I have this chronic disease in my lower back……which is, her…her…herpes? Yeah, that's it……”

“I think you're referring to hernia. However, there's no need for your worry. What I'm asking you to do is not manual labor.” Hiratsuka sensei regarded me with an exceedingly contemptuous expression.

---

[2] The service described here is sexual.

[3] In this context, he's referring to the desire to have sex. This is a line often said by Date Masamune from the game Sengoku BASARA. It's a colloquial phrase often used when expressing your enthusiasm to do something.

Well then. Is it research, or some other kind of deskwork? That kind of work means a mindless job that's more intense than manual labor. It's similar to the torture of filling a hole in the ground, only to dig it out again.

“I have this illness where I die upon entering a classroom.”

“What long-nosed sniper does that remind me of? The one from the Straw Hat Pirates?[4]”

So you read shounen manga?

Well, I don't mind laboriously doing work by myself. If I flip a switch in my mind, making it clear that I am a machine, there would be no problem. And in the end, I would pursue a mechanical body only to become a bolt.[5]

“We're here.”

The classroom sensei had stopped in front of was not unusual. There was nothing written on the doorplate. As I was staring at it in wonder, sensei opened the sliding door with a clatter. There were chairs and tables piled up in cluttered stacks along the edge.

---

[4] Reference to Usopp from the manga One Piece.

[5] Reference to the manga Galaxy 999 Express in which the protagonist, Testuro, aims to obtain a mechanical body to live an eternal life. Queen Promethuem, however, plans to transfer his consciousness to a bolt.

Perhaps it was being used as a storage room. In comparison to other classrooms, there was nothing else special about its contents apart from that. It was an exceedingly normal classroom. However, what was most obviously distinct from everything else in the room, was a single girl.

By the light of the sunset, she was reading a book. Even if the world had ended, she would still most certainly be sitting there, reading. That was the illusion she gave, so much so, that it was like a scene from a painting.

The moment I saw it, both my mind and my body froze.

I was inadvertently fascinated by it.

Realizing there were visitors, she placed a bookmark in her paperback book and looked up.

“Hiratsuka sensei. I thought I told you to knock before you enter…”

Elegant features. Long, flowing ebony hair. Wearing a uniform that should be the same as the group of girls from my class, but still looks entirely different.

“Even if I do knock, you never respond.”

“That's because you enter before I have time to respond.” She gave a disapproving look in response to Hiratsuka sensei's words. “And who is that airhead with you?” She gave me a quick once-over with a cold look in her eyes.

I know this girl. It's Yukinoshita Yukino - Grade 11, Class J.

Obviously, I only know her by name and by face - I've never talked to her before. There's no way I would have, because I seldom ever have conversations with people at school.

At Soubu High School, apart from the nine standard classes, there is one class aimed at nurturing talented students capable of fulfilling an active role in the international arena. This class has an academic standard that is two to three times better than the other classes. It mostly consists of students returning to Japan from overseas or students who have aspirations to study abroad.

Among such a class, the one student that is prominent, or rather, naturally draws people's attention and stands out brilliantly, is Yukinoshita Yukino. Whether it's a regular exam or a placement exam, she is a high achiever who consistently sits at the top of our grade. Simply put, she is virtually the most perfect and beautiful girl in school and everyone knows who she is.

On the other hand, I am just your average, completely mediocre student. That's why, even if she doesn't know me, I'm not offended in any way. Although, I was a little bit hurt that she used the word 'airhead'. Hurt enough to distract myself with the thought that there used to be a candy by that name and that I haven't seen it around lately.

“This is Hikigaya. He's looking to join the club.”

Prompted by Hiratsuka sensei, I nodded in acknowledgement. At this point it's probably time to segue into a self-introduction.

“I'm Hikigaya Hachiman - Grade 11, Class F. Um…Hey…What do you mean by join?” Looking to join what? Join this club?

Sensei began to talk. Had she already guessed what I was going to say?

“You must engage in this club's activities as a penalty. I won't allow any disagreement, objection, protest, questions or retorts. Cool down for a bit. Reflect on your actions!” Without allowing me any room to protest, she declared her verdict with great resolution. “With that being said, you can probably tell by looking, but his heart is considerably corrupt. As a result, he's a pitiable, lonely person.”

So you really can tell by just looking?

Sensei turned to face Yukinoshita and said, “If he could learn how to be sociable he might just clean up his act a little. Can I leave him to you? I'm requesting that you straighten out his corrupt, reclusive disposition.”

“If that's how it is, I think it would be a good idea if you beat and kick discipline into him,” Yukinoshita replied grudgingly.

……What a scary woman.

“I would if it was something I could do, but lately I’ve been having some problems myself. Also, physical violence isn't permitted.”

…It's like she's saying psychological violence is completely okay.

“I respectfully decline. That boy's lecherous eyes are filled with hidden intent that makes me feel that my life is in danger.” Yukinoshita set about readjusting her collar, which was not particularly out of place to begin with, and glared at me.

I'm not looking at that extremely modest chest of yours……Wait, am I? No, no I'm not, I'm really not looking. It just entered my line of sight for a bit and I was momentarily distracted.

“Don't worry, Yukinoshita. Since his eyes and heart are both corrupt, he is quite adept at self-preservation and calculating the trade-off between the benefits and risks of doing something. He would never do something that would result in a criminal charge. You can trust his petty thug nature.”

“That's not a compliment at all…Aren't you mistaken? It's not about self-preservation and analyzing risk-benefits, I'd rather you just say that I'm capable of making sensible judgements.”

“A petty thug…..I see……,” Yukinoshita said.

“You're not even listening to me and you ended up agreeing with her…”

Was Hiratsuka sensei successful in persuading her or did my petty thug nature win her trust? No matter which way it was, Yukinoshita had come to see me as everything I didn't want to be seen as.

“Well, if it's a request from sensei, I can't very well refuse……I accept.” Yukinoshita said with incredible distaste.

Sensei smiled with satisfaction. “Okay. Then, I'll leave the rest to you.” And with that, she left the room with haste.

I was left standing there alone.

1-3

Honestly, I would be feeling a whole lot less stressed if they had just let left me by myself. Being in an isolated environment, as I usually am, would make me feel more at ease. The sound of the clock's second hand was so dreadfully slow that I could hear it tick loudly.

Hey, wait, is this for real? A sudden romantic comedy development? An incredible blanket of tension just came over the room. I had no complaints about the situation.

Suddenly, I recalled a bittersweet memory from junior high school.

It's after school. There are two students alone in a classroom. The curtains sway with the light breeze, and as the rays of the setting sun stream through, a young boy gathers his courage and confesses.

I can still clearly remember that girl's voice. *'Can't we just be friends?'*

Ah no, this is a bad memory. We never even spoke again after that let alone stayed friends. Thanks to that, I ended up wondering if friendship was a relationship in which people didn’t have even have conversations with each other.

Well, the point is, being alone together with a beautiful girl in a locked room like some kind of romantic comedy would never happen to me in real life. Now that I’m highly trained, there's no way I would fall into such a trap.

Girls are shown to be interested in hotties and popular people. They also engage in impure relationships with them. The thought of it made me snigger.

In other words, they are my enemies.

Up until now, I've endeavored to make sure that I would never experience that again. The quickest way to avoid getting caught up in a romantic comedy development is by being hated. Lose the battle to win the war. I'll do anything to protect my pride so I don't need things like popularity!

That said, in lieu of a greeting, I decided to intimidate Yukinoshita by scowling at her. Wild beasts kill with their eyes!

Grrrrr —!

In response, Yukinoshita glanced at me like I was a piece of trash. She narrowed her large eyes as if to half-close them and let out a cold sigh. Then, with a voice like the murmuring of a clear stream, she spoke to me.

“……How about you stop standing there, making those disgusting growling noises, and just sit down?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

……Woah, what was with those eyes just now? A wild beast?

They would have certainly killed five people. Just like how that singer, Matsushima Tomoko, got caught in that leopard's mouth.[1] Did I just end up instinctively and unconsciously apologizing to her? Even without me intentionally trying to intimidate her, Yukinoshita had regarded me with hostility. Deeply unnerved, I pulled up an empty chair and sat down.

Afterwards, Yukinoshita didn't show me an ounce of concern. At some point in time, the paperback book had been opened again. The sound of the pages flipping ensued. I couldn't tell what she was reading by the cover, but I figured it must have been some kind of literary work. Something like Salinger, Hemingway or Tolstoy. That's the kind of impression she gave.

Yukinoshita is like some kind of noble much in the way that she is an honor student and also because no matter what, she would always be a beautiful girl. But as is normal for such elite people, Yukinoshita Yukino is cut off from any social circles. Just like her name, *yuki no shita no yuki* (The snow beneath the snow), however beautiful she is, she is untouchable and unobtainable. The only thing one can do is ponder her beauty.

Honestly, I never thought that through this absurd turn of events, I could be acquainted with her. I'm sure if I boasted about it to my friends, they'd be jealous. Even though I don't have friends I could boast to.

---

[1] Matsushima Tomoko is a Japanese singer who was attacked by both a lion and a leopard when she went to Kenya to film for a variety show.

And so, what should I do with Miss Beautiful, here?

“Is something wrong?”

It was probably because I was staring at her for too long, but Yukinoshita furrowed her brows in displeasure and stared right back at me.

“Ah, my bad. I was thinking about what I should do about all this.”

“About what?”

“Well I mean, it's just that I was brought here with nothing but a confusing explanation.”

In place of a ‘tsk-tsk’, she expressed her annoyance by vehemently snapping her book shut. Then after glaring at me with her eyes, as though I was a mere bug, she breathed a sigh of resignation and uttered a few words.

“……I suppose you're right. Then let's play a game.”

“A game?”

“Yes. A game which requires you to guess what kind of club this is. So then, what kind of club is this?”

A game with a beautiful girl in a locked room…..

I can only feel that there is some kind of erotic element to this, however the vibes she was giving off weren't light-hearted, but rather like that of a sharpened knife. So sharp that I wondered if my life would end if I lost. Where did that romantic comedy atmosphere go? Isn't this more like Kaiji?[2]

Giving into the pressure, I began to run a cold sweat as I surveyed the inside of the room, trying to find a clue.

“Are there any other club members?”

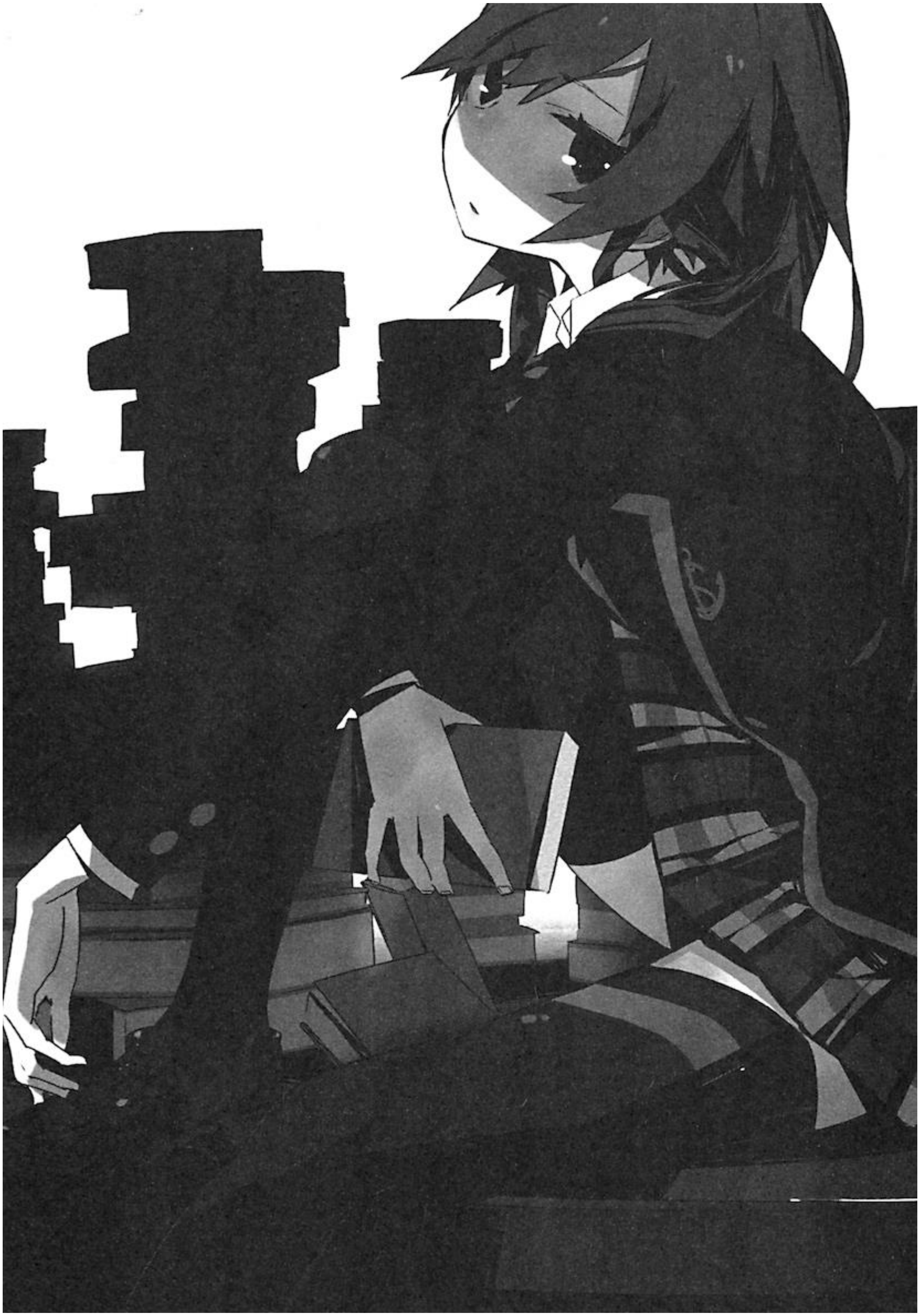
“No, there aren't.”

Is this club even able to continue as a club? I highly doubt it. To put it plainly, there are no hints.

No, wait. On the contrary, there has been nothing but hints. Not to boast but ever since I was little I was extremely good at one-player games, having few friends.

---

[2] *Kaiji* is a manga about the art of gambling.



I have quite a bit of confidence in gamebooks[3] and riddles. I think I could even win in one of those high school quiz shows. Well if it's a club that can't recruit other members, then other members can't participate. There are a lot of things I can gather from this. If I organize my thoughts from the beginning, the answer should become obvious.

“A literary club?”

“Really...? Your reason being?” Yukinoshita questioned with great interest.

"The peculiar setting, the lack of any need for special equipment and that despite the fact that there aren't enough members the club hasn't been abolished. In other words, it’s a club that doesn't require any expenses. In addition, you were reading a book. The answer was apparent from the start."

Flawless reasoning, if I do say so myself. Even without an elementary school kid with glasses saying 'Wah...really?' and giving me hints, something like this was a piece of cake.[4]

It would even make Miss Yukino show some admiration and say 'I see...' with a small huff.

"Incorrect." Yukinoshita gave a short and scornful laugh.

---

[3] A ‘choose your own adventure’ book.

[4] Reference to the child detective Conan from the manga *Detective Conan*, and his famous phrase

…..Now, this is getting on my nerves. Who the hell said you were the irreproachable, perfect superman? You're more like the demon superman.[5]

"Then what kind of club is this?" Despite the irritation in my voice, Yukinoshita made no motion that she was bothered by it. She made it clear that the game would continue.

"All right, I'll give you the biggest hint. My being here, doing what I am, is the club's activities."

Finally she gives me a hint. But it isn't related to the answer at all. Eventually I'll just end up arriving at the same conclusion as before – a literary club.

No, wait. Just wait a minute and calm down. Cool it. Be cool, Hikigaya Hachiman.

She said 'there aren't any other club members apart from me.' Yet the club is still functioning.

In other words, does that mean there are phantom members? Then the twist in the story would be that the phantom members really *are* phantoms. And in the very end, my romantic comedy would be slated to develop between a beautiful phantom girl and me.

---

[5] Reference to the chojin (superhumans) of the manga *Kinnikuman.*

“An occult research society!”

“I told you it was a club…”

“O-occult research club!”

“Wrong……That’s ridiculous. Ghosts don’t exist.”

Without displaying the least bit of cuteness by saying something like *‘B-because you know, they really don’t exist! I’m not saying that because I’m scared or something!’* she used all her power to look at me with the most scornful eyes. They were the kind of eyes that said ‘Idiots should die.’

“I give up. I don't have a clue.”

1-4

As if I’d figure it out with just that. You should’ve made it simpler. Something like, ‘There is a flood of tears above but a blazing house fire below, why?’[1] Wouldn't that be because your house is actually on fire? At any rate, this isn’t a guessing game but a riddle.

“Hikigaya-kun. How many years has it been since you’ve talked to a girl?”

She went ahead and asked such a sudden and irrelevant question to shatter my line of reasoning. Some nerve this girl has.

I’m pretty confident in my ability to retain information. I can remember the kind of trivial conversations that most people would forget - to the point where the girls in my class treated me like a stalker. According to my superior hippocampus, the last time I talked to a girl was two years ago in June.

Girl: ‘It’s pretty hot today huh?’

Me: ‘More like humid, don’t you think?’

Girl: ‘What?......Oh…Um…yeah, I guess’

---

[1] This is a play on a Japanese riddle which asks ‘There is a flood above but a blazing fire below, what am I?’ The answer is a bathtub. The joke is that you’re crying because your house is actually on fire. (Too difficult to translate =.=)

End.

It went something like that. Well except for the fact that she wasn't actually talking to me but to the girl sitting diagonally behind me. Humans more often remember unpleasant memories. Even now, every time I recall that incident in the middle of the night, I get the urge to pull the covers over my head and scream.

Just as I was reliving that horrendous incident, Yukinoshita made a loud proclamation.

"Those that possess much are motivated by charity to give to those who do not. People call this volunteer work. Providing development assistance to developing countries, organizing soup-runs for the homeless, allowing an unpopular boy the opportunity to talk to a girl. Extending a helping hand to those in need. That is what this club does."

At some point, Yukinoshita had stood up. Naturally, she was looking down at me.
"Welcome to the service club. I invite you."

The fact that she didn't sound very welcoming was apparent by the way she said it straight to my face. That made me a little teary-eyed. She just kept rubbing salt onto my wounds, depressing me even further.

"According to Hiratsuka sensei, it is the duty of those who are superior to save those who lead a pitiable existence.

I will make sure that I accomplish what she requested of me and fulfill this responsibility. I will rectify your problem. Show some gratitude.”

Perhaps what she’s alluding to is ‘noblesse oblige’. A French phrase referring to the moral obligation of the noble to display honorable and generous conduct. Yukinoshita standing there with her arms folded certainly spelled nobility. In fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call her noble, considering her grades and her outward appearance.

“This bitch……”

But, I must say no more. I ought to wield all the words I have at my disposal to explain that I am not one to be pitied.

“…. You know, even though it’s me saying it, I’m actually fairly superior myself. I ranked third in the Japanese Proficiency exam! I’m pretty good-looking! If you disregard the fact that I don’t have a girlfriend or any friends, I’m basically top of the line.”

“Though I’m sure I heard you mention a fatal flaw towards the end…In a way, it’s amazing you can say all that so confidently. You’re a weirdo. I’m already creeped out.”

“Shut up. I don’t want to hear that from a weird girl like you.”

She really is weird. At least that is what the rumors say. Rumors that I just happened to hear since I don’t recall ever talking to someone. They say that Yukinoshita is very different from the girl she appears to be.

That probably means she’s a so-called cool beauty. And right now she wore a cold smile. To use a better descriptive word, a sadistic smile.

“Hm…Based on my observations, it seems that your loneliness is a result of your corrupt mind and cynical temperament.” Yukinoshita concluded, eagerly. “Firstly, I will find a place for you in society. Given that you’re so pitiable, I just can’t leave you alone. Did you know? Just by finding a place to belong in, one can escape the tragic fate of burning up to produce a star.”

“ ‘The Nighthawk’s Star’[2], right? That’s pretty nerdy.” If I wasn’t the culturally aware prodigy who placed third in the Japanese Proficiency exam, I wouldn’t have gotten that reference. Also, since it’s a story I like, I remember it well. It was so tragic that I actually cried. It’s the kind of story that is well liked by everyone.

In response to my retort, Yukinoshita’s eyes widened in surprise. “…..I’m astonished. I never imagined that a below average high school boy would read the works of Miyazawa Kenji.”

“Did you just belittle me?”

---

[2] *The Nighthawk’s Star* is a Japanese fable about a bird called Nighthawk who is ridiculed for his ugliness. He yearns to fly far away and as a result, he dies. Afterwards his body becomes a beautiful light that produces an ever-shining star.

“I’m sorry. That may have been a bit of an exaggeration. Just short of average is probably the correct thing to say.”

“Don’t you mean a bit *too much* of an exaggeration?! Didn’t you hear me say I ranked third in the grade?!”

“To be full of yourself just because you ranked third once is pathetic. Considering the results of an examination in one subject as indicative of one’s sharp intellect is also pathetic.”

….This girl. There is a limit to how rude one can be. For her to be treating a guy she just met as belonging to an inferior race, I must only have as much knowledge as the Prince of all Saiyans.[3]

“Although, ‘The Nighthawk’s star’ suits you perfectly. Take for example, the Nighthawk’s physical appearance.”

“Are you saying that my face is disfigured?....”

“That’s not what I’m trying to say. I’m just saying that sometimes the truth hurts…”

“Aren't you practically saying the same thing?!”

---

[3] Reference to Prince Vegeta from the manga *Dragon Ball* who is known more for his fighting abilities than his intelligence.

At this point, Yukinoshita took on a serious expression as she rested her hand on my shoulder. “You should not look away from the truth. Look into a mirror to see reality.”

“Hey, just wait a minute. Though it might be me saying it, my features are quite handsome. Enough to have my sister tell me, ‘Onii-chan, if only you didn’t talk at all…’ Which is virtually the same as saying, the only thing good about me is my looks.”

As expected of my sister. She has a good eye. Which, on the contrary, is something that the girls in this school lack!

Yukinoshita placed a hand on her temple as though she had a headache. “Are you an idiot? Beauty is not something that can be decided about oneself subjectively. In other words, as we are the only two people in this room, my objective opinion is the only correct opinion.”

“D-despite being confusing, somehow your argument makes sense…”

“To start with, eyes such as yours which emulate those of a rotten fish, would invariably leave a bad impression. I’m not criticizing your facial features but rather your facial expression, which is unattractive. It is proof of your considerably twisted nature.”

As she talked, Yukinoshita’s face was certainly cute, but on the inside, it was different. The look in her eyes was comparable to that of a criminal. She and I both lack any cutesy charm.

……But despite that, do my eyes really look like those of a fish? If I was a girl I could interpret it as a plus saying, ‘What? Do I really look like the Little Mermaid?’

Just as I was busy distracting myself with my musings, Yukinoshita flipped her hair over her shoulder and said, as if in triumph, “The point is, being self-confident in superficial aspects such as grades or physical appearance is unappealing. Not to mention those rotten eyes of yours.”

“Enough with the eyes already!”

“Yes, I suppose even if I say any more than this, it won’t change anything.”

“You can start by apologizing to my parents.”

I could feel my face twitch in anticipation of her response. It soon appeared that even Yukinoshita’s expression became despondent as she reflected on her words.

“I certainly said some horrible things. It must be painful for your parents.”

“Please just stop, it’s my fault. No, it’s my face’s fault.” I entreated, on the verge of getting teary-eyed. Finally, Yukinoshita put an end to her steely words. I quickly realized that it was useless saying anything. And as I became immersed in a vision of myself sitting at the foot of Buddha’s tree, meditating with the aim to attain enlightenment, Yukinoshita continued conversation.

“Well then, that completes this conversation simulation. If you can converse with a girl like me, then you should be able to talk to just about anybody.” Smoothing her hair with her right hand, Yukinoshita gave an expression that was brimming with a sense of accomplishment. Then she smiled pleasantly. “Now you have this spectacular memory to hold in your heart that will keep you going even when you’re alone.”

“Isn’t that solution just wishful thinking on your part?”

“But if that’s so, then it wouldn’t fulfill sensei’s request...I have approach it on an elementary level…like for example, having you stop school.”

“That isn’t a solution. That’s just like covering up a stench.”[4]

“Ah, so you are aware of the fact that you're a nuisance?”[5]

---

[4] A Japanese idiom meaning to hide a failure or an inconvenience through underhanded means.

[5] By ‘the stench’, Yukinoshita is actually saying that he is aware of the fact that he ‘s a ‘nuisance’. The Japanese word for something that smells bad (kusaimono) could also refer to someone who is a ‘nuisance’. This leads to the following joke he makes.

"Is that why I receive these *foul* glares and people *avoid* me?" I attempted to respond with a play on words, but to no avail.

"…So annoying."

After I laughed at my somewhat witty remark, Yukinoshita glared at me as if to say 'Why are you even alive?' Like I said, her eyes were scary.

Then a silence descended upon the room – enough to make my ears hurt. Actually it was probably also because I let Yukinoshita say whatever she wanted that my ears hurt.

However, the silence was soon shattered, as the door was violently pulled open with a resounding clatter.

1-5

“Yukinoshita. I’m coming in.”

“I told you to knock…” Yukinoshita sighed.

“Sorry, sorry. Don't mind me and just continue as you were. I just thought I’d stop by and see how you’re doing.” Hiratsuka sensei gave Yukinoshita a generous smile, and leaned against the classroom wall. She then looked back and forth between Yukinoshita and me.

“It’s nice that you two are getting along with each other.”

What made you draw that conclusion?

“Hikigaya, keep up the good work and focus on straightening out that cynical temperament and curing those rotten eyes of yours. I’ll be heading back now. Just make sure you head home before the end of the school day.”

“P-please just wait a second!” I grabbed sensei’s hand in an attempt to stop her. In that instant-

“Ow! Owwwww! I give up! I give up!”

She had me in an armlock. After I frantically tapped out and admitted defeat, she finally let me go.

“Oh it was just you Hikigaya. Don’t just carelessly stand behind me because I’ll instinctively unleash my powerful techniques on you.”

“What are you, Golgo[1]? Besides, aren’t you the careless one? Don’t do that so suddenly!”

“Aren’t you demanding?...Anyway, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is *you*....what do you mean by ‘straighten out’? Doesn’t that make me sound like a juvenile delinquent? Just what the hell is this all about?”

Hiratsuka sensei rubbed her chin thoughtfully for a moment.

“Didn’t Yukinoshita explain it to you? Basically, the main aim of this club is to help people solve their problems by encouraging self-improvement. I guide students who I believe require self-improvement to this club. You can think of it as the Hyperbolic Time Chamber[2]. Or perhaps Revolutionary Girl Utena[3], if that makes it easier to understand.”

---

[1] Reference to Golgo 13 from the manga *Golgo 13.* Golgo 13 is a professional assassin.

[2] Reference to the place of the name in the manga *Dragon Ball.* Characters use it in order to undergo intense training as one year in the chamber equates to one day in the real world.

[3] Reference to the manga *Revolutionary Girl Utena.*

“It made it even more difficult to understand and just illustrates how old you are.”

“What did you just say?”

“….Nothing at all.” I murmured retreating into myself after being shot by the terribly frosty expression she gave me.

Hiratsuka sensei sighed as she observed me.

“Yukinoshita. It appears that you’re having a hard time straightening him out.”

“That’s because he himself isn’t aware of the fact that he has a problem.” Yukinoshita replied coldly in response to sensei’s troubled expression.

……This feeling….I just can’t stand to be here another second. It feels similar to the time when my parents found out about my porn stash in sixth grade and kept lecturing me about it.

No, probably not that bad.

“Um…you’ve been saying nonsensical stuff about straightening me out and improvement and reformation and revolutionary girls and whatnot for a while now, but I never really asked for any of it…”

Hiratsuka sensei cocked her head slightly in confusion. “Hm?”

“…What are you saying? If you don’t change, you’ll be at a level that’ll make living in society difficult.” Yukinoshita looked at me as if her argument was as justified as saying ‘War is fruitless. Lay down your arms.’ “It appears that your humanity is severely inferior to that of others. Don’t you want to change that part of yourself?”

“That’s not it….I don’t want people who keep harping on about making me change, telling me who I am. Generally, to change yourself at the word of another would mean that you wouldn’t be yourself anymore right? It is said that the self is…”

“The self is such that it cannot be viewed by oneself objectively.”

My attempt at sounding impressive by ripping a saying off Descartes was intercepted by Yukinoshita...Even though I was about to say something pretty good.

“You’re just running away from the problem. If you don’t change, you won’t move forward.” Yukinoshita said, cutting me down with her harsh words. Why has she been so hostile and snappy the whole time? Are her parents crabs or something?

“What’s wrong with running away? Don’t keep telling me to change like an idiot who only knows one thing.

If you're like that then do you do things like face the sun and say, 'The westering sun is too intense and everybody's bothered by it so please set in the east from now on."

"That's fallacy. Please don't stray from the issue at hand. The sun does not move - it is the Earth that moves. Don't you know the heliocentric theory?"

"That was just a figure of speech! If that was fallacy then what you're saying is also fallacy. By changing, in the end I'd be changing in order to run away from the problem. So who's running away from the problem now? If I really wasn't running away from the problem, I wouldn't change and just stay right where I am. Why can't you just accept my past and the way am I now?"

"….If that's how it is, it wouldn't solve any problems or save anybody." As Yukinoshita spoke the word 'save', her expression was that of bloodcurdling anger. I inadvertently flinched. I was on the verge of apologizing by blurting out a 'S-s-s-sorry!' if needed be. Talking about salvation isn't usually something a mere high school student would do. I just can't understand what it is that is driving her this far.

"Both of you just calm down." Hiratsuka sensei's calm tone eased what was to become, or rather, what had been an unpleasant atmosphere from the very start. Just by looking at her grinning face, you could tell that she was full of anticipation and delight. "Things have become interesting. I love developments like these. It's like JUMP[4], which is nice don't you think?"

---

[4] A line of manga magazines aimed at boys.

Somehow, sensei was the only one who was ecstatic. Even though she was female, her eyes were like those of a young boy. “Since before ancient times, when two collide in the name of justice, it is customary in shounen manga to battle it out in an all or nothing match.”

“But we’re not in a shounen manga…” Nobody paid attention to me.

As sensei let out a resounding laugh, she turned to us and made a loud announcement.

“Well then let’s do it this way. From now on, I will guide troubled lambs to this club where they will be under your supervision. The both of you will try and help them as you see fit. And it would be good if you prove your moral righteousness to each other to the best of your ability. Who can help these people?! Gundam Fight. Ready, Go!!”[5]

“I refuse.” Yukinoshita declared, bluntly rejecting her proposition. Her eyes harbored the same coldness that had been directed at me only a little while ago. Well, since I agreed with her, I nodded in assent. Not to mention that G Gundam isn’t from our generation.

After sensei had registered our unwillingness, she bit her nails in frustration.

“Tch, maybe a Robattle[5] would have been easier to understand…”

---

[5] Reference to the RPG *Medabots*. A robattle is an activity in which one medafighter fights another with his/her medabot.

“That’s not the problem…”

Games like ‘Medabots’ are too geeky……

“Sensei. Please stop acting childishly hyperactive. It is unbecoming of someone your age and it’s awfully indecent.” Yukinoshita hurled ice-cold sharp words like they were icicles. It wasn’t clear if sensei had calmed down or not, but in an instant sensei’s face was colored pink in embarrassment. She cleared her throat so as to cover up her faux pas.

“In-in any case! The only thing that will prove one’s rectitude is their actions! If I said you must have a match, then you will have a match. Neither of you have the right to say no.”

“That’s too tyrannical….”

She’s exactly like a kid! The only part of her that’s adult like is her chest. Well, in something as stupid as a battle I’d lose for fun. Hah. But getting a star for my efforts wouldn’t be so bad. To say that there’s meaning in participating in such a thing is a convenient and overly extravagant thing to say.

Nonetheless, the overly detestable woman child[6] with a mind full of shounen manga was still spouting absurd remarks.

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[6] The original word used here is roribaba, which refers to a woman who acts and looks like a little girl but is actually a lot older.

“In order for you to fight with your utmost desperate efforts, I’ll provide a little motivation. How about, the winner can command the loser to do anything they wish?”

“Absolutely anything?!”

By *anything*, it must mean *that* right? It can’t be anything but *that anything*….gulp.

Suddenly, the sound of a chair being pulled back could be heard. Yukinoshita had moved back two meters, embracing her body as she took a defensive position.

“Competing against this boy makes me feel that my chastity is in peril. I refuse.”

“Prejudice! It’s not as if all second year high school boys only think about obscene stuff!” There are a lot of other things like, uh….I’m thinking! …..world peace? Stuff like that? Other than that, there’s not much else I think about.

“So even Yukinoshita Yukino is fearful of something….Are you that afraid you’ll lose?” Hiratsuka said with a malicious face. Yukinoshita appeared a little offended at that.

“….Fine. Although, I’m a little annoyed that I must give in to such cheap provocation. I accept. While we’re at it, I’ll let you deal with that boy, also. ”

Woah, Yukinoshita's a sore loser. How is she the type that hates to lose, you ask? The fact that she basically said 'I can see right through your intentions' like someone who hates to lose. I mean, what does she mean by 'deal with'? You're scary already so just stop it.

Hiratsuka sensei grinned broadly, ignoring Yukinoshita's gaze.

"Then it's decided."

"Hey, you haven't asked me if I accept…."

"One look at that grin on your face and I saw no point in asking you."

I see….

"I will decide the winner of this match. Of course, the decision will be influenced by my opinion and bias. Don't think about it too much and just act accordingly….in an appropriate and proper manner and do your best." Having uttered these words, Hiratsuka sensei left the room, leaving only a very cross Yukinoshita and I behind.

Of course, there's nothing to talk about. While remaining motionless in that silent room, a sound like that of a broken radio resounded. It was sign that a chime was about to ring. Indeed, after a synthesized chime had sounded, Yukinoshita suddenly closed her book. It seemed that the chime indicated the end of the school day.

With that as a signal, Yukinoshita quickly set about getting her things together to go home. After she had carefully put her book in her bag, she stood up. Then, she gave me a fleeting glance. And with just that and not a word, she left. Without even a ‘see you tomorrow’ or a ‘goodbye’, she had briskly walked out. I didn’t even get the chance to call her out on her exceedingly cold reception.

And there I was all-alone, the only one left in that room. Was today an unlucky day or something? I got called to the teacher’s lounge, was forced to join a mysterious club and got verbally abused by a girl whose good looks are wasted on the only cute part of her – her face. I’ve sustained some considerably extensive damage.

Isn’t talking to a girl supposed to make you more excited? My heart only sank in despair.

If it’s going to be like this, then talking to stuffed animals everyday would be a lot better. They don’t talk back and they always smile brightly at you. Why wasn’t I born a hardcore masochist?

And on top of that, why am I forced to compete in such a pointless match? With Yukinoshita as my opponent, I don’t think I can win. I wonder if something like a match would generally be considered part of club activities. When I think of club activities, something like what those girl bands do on those DVDs would be just right.

With things continuing as they are now, will we ever be able to get along? Not likely.

She'd probably command me in that unconcerned manner by saying something like, 'Your breath smells, so could you stop breathing for at least three hours?'

As I expected, youth is full of nothing but lies.

After losing a baseball tournament during their third year, they shed tears to make themselves seem beautiful. After failing their college entrance exam, they insist that their failure is simply a life experience. After failing to confess to the person they like, they withdraw. They deceive themselves by feigning ignorance, saying that they were thinking about that person's happiness.

And then there's that. Anticipating a romantic comedy with an unsociable, irritating so-called tsundere[7] girl that is never going to happen. My essay does not require any amendments. As I expected; youth is a pretence, a deceptive word, and fraudulent.

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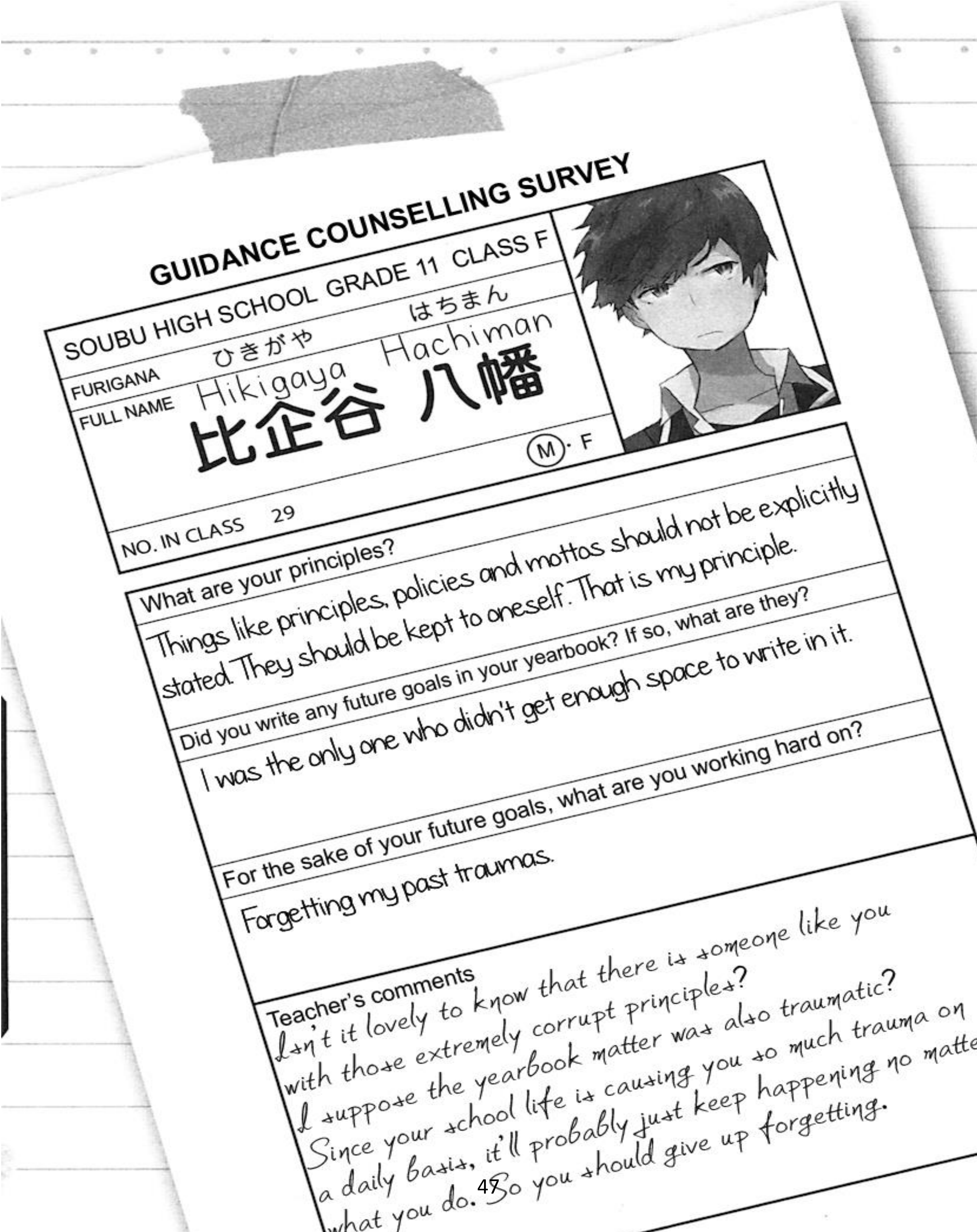
[7] Tsundere is a term used for someone who appears cold on the outside but is in fact warm on the inside. (Tsuntsun = turn away in disgust. Deredere = lovey dovey.)



GUIDANCE COUNSELLING SURVEY

SOUBU HIGH SCHOOL GRADE 11 CLASS F

FURIGANA ひきがや はちまん

FULL NAME Hikigaya Hachiman 比企谷 八幡

[✓ M]·F

NO. IN CLASS 29

What are your principles?

Things like principles, policies and mottos should not be explicitly stated. They should be kept to oneself. That is my principle.

Did you write any future goals in your yearbook? If so, what are they?

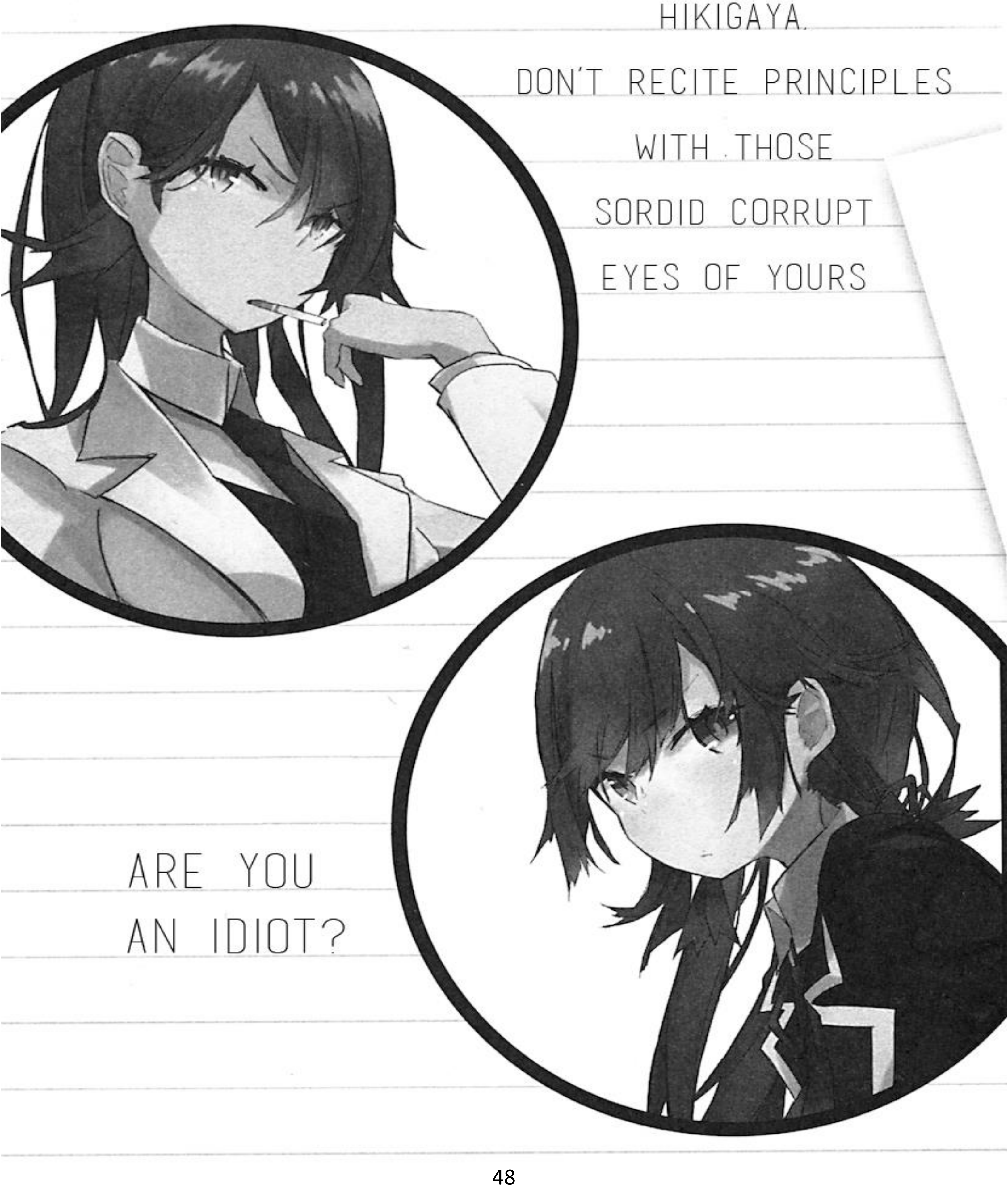
I was the only one who didn't get enough space to write in it.

For the sake of your future goals, what are you working hard on?

Forgetting my past traumas.

Teacher's comments

Isn't it lovely to know that there is someone like you with those extremely corrupt principles?
I suppose the yearbook matter was also traumatic?
Since your school life is causing you so much trauma on a daily basis, it'll probably just keep happening no matte
what you do. So you should give up forgetting.


HIKIGAYA,
DON'T RECITE PRINCIPLES
WITH THOSE
SORDID CORRUPT
EYES OF YOURS
ARE YOU
AN IDIOT?

Chapter 2: Yukinoshita Yukino is always headstrong.

As I was exiting the classroom after homeroom had finished, I spotted Hiratsuka sensei lying in wait for me. She was like a prison guard, standing completely motionless with her arms folded. In fact, if she had come dressed in military uniform and been given a whip, it would probably suit her a little too much. Well since school is pretty much like a jail, that wouldn't be too much of a stretch of the imagination. I mean you could compare it to Alcatraz or Cassandra[1]. It would be nice if the Savior of the Century's End would hurry up and arrive.[2]

"Hikigaya. It's time for club activities."

As she soon as she said that, I could suddenly feel my blood run cold. Crap. I'm going to be arrested. If I get escorted to the clubroom I seriously will lose all hope in my school life.

Yukinoshita, a natural born stuck-up, speaks words that are sort of venomous. They're really just abusive and not cute at all. Would you call that being a tsundere? Oh wait, that just describes a plain old bitch.

But despite that, Hiratsuka sensei didn't give me an ounce of consideration and wore a smile of indifference.

---

[1] Reference to the mighty prison belonging to Ken-Oh from the manga *Fist of The North Star*. It is also known as the 'City of Wailing Demons' and was used to imprison martial artists who had forfeited their ancient scrolls to Ken-Oh in his goal to create the ultimate martial art.

[2] Reference to Kenshiro, the protagonist of the manga *Fist of the North Star*. Kenshiro protects the weak and innocent from the numerous gangs roaming the post-apocalyptic wasteland, eventually gaining his reputation as the 'Savior of the Century's End'.

“Let’s go.” Hiratsuka sensei said and attempted to grab my arm. I evaded her. Without hesitating, she reached out her hand again. I barely dodged her again.

“Umm, you see…I think that well, among other things, our education system is supposed to encourage and respect students’ independence…so I would like to object to the way I am being forced to do this…”

“Unfortunately, schools are institutions that are designed to train students to become well-integrated citizens of society. Once you go out into society nobody is going to care about your opinion. So you’d better start getting used to being forced to do things.” As soon as sensei had said that, her fist came flying at me.

She didn’t give me a regular punch but a full-blown body blow with her clenched fist drilling into me like a screw. It was so powerful I couldn’t breath. Then without missing a second, she stopped trying to kill me and gripped my hand instead.

“You know what’ll happen if you try and bail again, right? Don’t try and provoke my fist.”

“Are you really dead set on using your fist…”

There’s no way the pain could get any worse.

As we were walking, Hiratsuka sensei opened her mouth as though she’d remembered something.

"Oh that's right. If you try to escape again you will lose the match with Yukinoshita by default. No buts allowed. In addition, you will be penalized. It'd be best not to expect that you will be able to graduate in your final year."

There was definitely no way I was getting out of this anytime soon. Not mentally either for that matter. As the sound of her heels click clacking on the floor resounded, sensei walked beside me. To make things worse, she gripped my arm. Any other circumstance and it would have looked like sensei was a bar hostess cosplaying as a teacher who was escorting me to her cosplay cabaret.

But there were three things that were different. Firstly, I wasn't paying her any money. Secondly, she wasn't actually gripping my arm but the end of my elbow. Lastly, I wasn't happy or excited *at all.* Well except for the fact that the end of my elbow was touching sensei's breast.

The only place she's taking me right now is that clubroom.

"Um, I'm not going to run away or anything so I'll be okay going by myself. I mean you know I'm always alone. I'm totally fine by myself. Or rather, if I'm not by myself I can't keep my composure."

"Don't say such sad things. I want us to go together." Sensei gave a soft sigh and smiled gently. It was totally different from the usual narrowed eyes she looks at me with. The difference startled me.

“Letting you escape would be enough to make me grind my teeth. So even if I don’t want to, I’ll have to drag you there to ease my mental stress.”

“That’s the worst excuse ever!”

“How should I put it? Even though I’m absolutely fed up with all this, I’m still accompanying you there for the sake of straightening you out. This is what you would call a beautiful bond of love between a teacher and her student.”

“This is *love*? If this is love then I don’t need it.”

“Well that excuse just shows that you really are twisted, doesn’t it?.....So twisted that your pressure points are reversed? Are you going to be constructing the Holy Cross Mausoleum or something?”[3]

You seriously love manga too much…

“If you were a little more compliant you’d be cuter. It can’t be much fun looking at the world through that distorted view of yours.”

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[3] Reference to Thouzer from the manga *Fist of The North Star* whose organs and pressure points are reversed. Due to a traumatic event in which he killed his sensei, he disavowed all feelings of love and compassion. He then took on the title of Holy Emperor and enslaved children with his army in order to construct the Holy Cross Mausoleum, a shrine to his deceased sensei.

“Well it’s not like the world is full of sunshine and daisies. If society was only shaped by the view that one must be happy-go-lucky all the time, Hollywood wouldn’t make tear-jerking movies would they? One can find pleasure in tragedies.”

“Making speeches like that must be pretty typical for you. Although it’s pretty common for young people to be cynical, for you it’s already an illness. An illness characteristic of eleventh graders. Yeah you really do have ‘kounibyou’.”[4]

Hiratsuka sensei wore a brilliant smile as she confirmed my ‘illness’.

“Hey, isn’t that a little too harsh? Treating me like I have an illness. I mean what the hell is ‘kounibyou’ anyway?”

“Do you like manga and anime?” Ignoring my request for an explanation, she changed the subject.

“Well, I don’t dislike it or anything.”

“So why do you like it?”

---

[4] ‘Kounibyou’ (高二病) literally translates to ‘Second year of high school sickness’. It is characterised by a dislike of ‘chuunibyou’ (Second year of junior high sickness) in which teenagers become overly self-conscious.

“Well that’s because…….It’s representative of Japanese culture. It’s also a part of pop culture that is recognised as the pride of Japan. Wouldn’t it be strange if I didn’t acknowledge that fact? Since the domestic market is becoming larger, we can’t ignore it on an economic front either.”

“I see. How about general literature, then? Higashino Keigo and Isaka Koutarou4 and the like?”[5]

“Well I have read them but honestly, I like the books they wrote before they became popular.”

“What are you favorite light novel publishing labels?”

“Gagaga….and Kodansha Box[6]. Well I don’t know if you can consider what Kodansha Box publishes as light novels though. Why are you asking me all this stuff?”

“Well. You’ve really met my expectations – not in a good way. A perfect instance of *kounibyou*.”

“Like I said, what the hell is ‘kounibyou’?….”

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[5] Keigo Higashino is a Japanese author chiefly known for his mystery novels. Isaka Koutarou is a Japanese author of detective fiction.

[6] Gagagaga Bunko is a light novel label published by Shogakukan. Oregairu is published by them. Kodansha Box is a publishing line from the major Japanese publishing house, Kodansha.

"Kounibyou is simply Kounibyou. A common state of mind experienced by high school students. They think that being cynical is cool and always express views that are popular on the internet such as 'Work and you lose to the system'.[7] When referring to popular novelists and manga writers, they say 'I like the books they wrote before they became popular'. They mock things that everybody worships and praise those that are obscure. And on top of that, they make fun of otakus even though they are like them. While giving off an air like they understand everything, they spout twisted logic. Basically, they're unlikable."

"Unlikable…. Crap! That's pretty much spot on so I can't refute!"

"No, I'm kind of praising you. Students are actually quite clever these days and come to terms with reality quite easily. As a teacher, it's not as if I find it fun to point out your faults. I mean considering the way that I'm talking to you like you're an adult it feels like we're working right now."

"Students these days, huh?" I couldn't help the wry smile that crept across my face. What a cliché thing to say. Feeling kind of pissed off, I thought about responding with a slight retort. However after noticing sensei staring hard into my eyes, I just shrugged my shoulders.

"It looked like you were just about to say something but it was probably something completely characteristic of someone with *kounibyou"*

---

[7] The original Japanese expression is 'Hataraitara make' (働いたら負け).It is a view commonly expressed by NEETs and school students who believe there is no point in working if what you earn is less than the amount of welfare you can obtain.

"….Oh really."

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea but I'm seriously kind of praising you. I like people who stick to their ideas. Even though they may be twisted."

Having her say 'like' so suddenly could only leave me stumped for words like an idiot. I found myself worrying about trying to find a retort to counter words I wasn't used to hearing.

"Being as twisted as you are, what do you think of Yukinoshita Yukino?"

"She's a bitch." I immediately replied. I hated her so much that it was as though sensei had said 'I think you should give up on "Concrete Road".'[8]

"I see." Hiratsuka sensei said with a bitter smile. "Although, she really is an extraordinarily excellent student….Well, those who 'have' may indeed suffer just by 'having'. But still, she is a very sweet girl."

In what way? I thought, shaking my head in my mind.

---

[8] 'Concrete road' is a song written by Shizuku, the protagonist of the Ghibli film *Whisper of the Heart*. Her love interest, Seiji Amasawa, is cruel in the beginning and tells her that she should 'give up on 'Concrete road''. After which, she mutters 'jerk' under her breath numerous times all the way home. Hachiman is saying that, that is how much he hates Yukinoshita.

“She would certainly have some kind of ‘illness’ too. She’s kind and occasionally right. But society is neither kind nor righteous. I’m sure it’s a hard way to live.”

“Putting aside the fact that she’s righteous and kind, I’m sure most of society would agree with you.” As soon as I said that, sensei looked at me as if to say ‘That’s what I was thinking.’

“As I expected you are – the both of you are quite contrary. I’m worried about the fact that neither of you seem like you’ll be able to adapt to society well. That’s why I want to bring you both to the same place.”

“Would that be an isolation ward?.....”

“Yeah probably. I like watching students like you two, its fun. So maybe it’s just that I want the both of you to be close by.” She laughed cheerfully.

Then, like always, she had trapped me in an armlock. Both her arms locked mine around her torso so that they were held straight.[9] This mixed martial arts type move was probably influenced by manga. As my elbows made this unpleasant creaking sound, they kept rubbing up against sensei’s huge bust.

…..Jeez. As per usual, I’m finding it difficult to escape after having her pull a perfect move on me. It’s vexing but it shouldn't be long before I have to just give in to this feeling.

---

[9] Look up ‘kimedashi’, the sumo-wrestling move, for further information.

No actually I’m already done for.

At that point I thought, since there are two breasts, ‘bust’ should be pluralized as ‘busts’.

2-2

Once we reached the special building, sensei finally released me. Maybe she had finally stopped worrying about me running away. Nevertheless, she kept glancing in my direction as she left me there. She didn’t express any sentiment that was remotely compassionate by saying something like ‘I’m sorry to part with you’ or ‘I hate to leave you…’. The only vibe she was giving off was an intense will to kill that was saying ‘You understand what will happen if you run away right?...’

I smiled wryly at that as I walked down the hallway.

There was dead silence at one end of the special building and the air was chilly.

There should have been other clubs going on but I hadn’t heard any noises that it indicated it as such, yet. I didn’t know if it was because this was the special building or if it was because of *her.* A result of the strange aura Yukinoshita Yukino was emitting.

I put my hand on the door to open it. Honestly, I was feeling depressed but on the other hand the thought of running away irritated me too. The important thing is not to let anything she says get to me. I shouldn’t think about us being alone together. I should just think of her being there and me being there separately.

If there’s no relation between us, I wouldn’t have to feel awkward and uncomfortable.

And so today it begins: the first way to prevent feeling scared of being alone – 'If you see a stranger, think of them as a stranger.' Incidentally, there isn't a second way.

Basically, awkwardness is a result of thoughts such as 'If I don't say something…' and 'If I don't try and get along with her…' gnawing at your mind.

It's the same as how someone sitting next to another person on a train wouldn't be thinking 'Crap! We're alone together! This is so awkward!'.

If I think of it like that, I can get over this whole thing. It would be good if she was just silently reading a book or something.

As I opened the clubroom door, I saw Yukinoshita sitting there reading a book in the exact same position as yesterday.

"….."

It was a good thing I opened the door but then I found myself wondering whether it would be a good idea to say something. Anyway, I just gave her a brief nod and moved past her.

Yukinoshita just gave me a quick glance and then a second later her eyes returned to her paperback book.

"At this distance, in this room – Are you being ostracized?"

She completely ignored me and I felt like I just vanished into thin air. Isn't this exactly like how I feel like in the classroom?

"That's a strange greeting. What tribe does it originate from?"

"…..Good afternoon." I uttered a greeting I'd learned in nursery school, unable to bear her caustic remark. Yukinoshita smiled in response.

This is probably the first time Yukinoshita Yukino has shown me her smile. As she smiled, I learned whether or not she had dimples or a double tooth peeking out. In other words, she was cute. Something I didn't care about at all.

"Good afternoon. I thought you weren't going to come anymore." That smile of hers was certainly foul play. It was on the same level as Maradona's 'Hand of God'.[1]

"I-it's not that big of a deal! If I didn't turn up I'd lose so that's the only reason! D-don't get the wrong idea!" This was a little like a romantic comedy type conversation. However we're playing opposite roles – it's like I'm the girl and she's the guy. This sucks after all.

I didn't get the feeling Yukinoshita was particularly offended by my remark. That is to say, on the other hand, she continued conversation like she didn't even care about my response.

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[1] Reference to the Argentinean soccer player Diego Maradona who scored a goal with a handball that was later called 'The Hand of God'.

“When one is lambasted to that degree, they wouldn’t normally come again….Are you a masochist?”

“No…..”

“A stalker, then?”

“Wrong again. Hey, why are you assuming that I’ve got a thing for you?”

“You don’t?”

This bitch. She nonchalantly cocked her head in puzzlement and made a confused face! It was a little cute but I’m not buying any of it!

“As if! Even I’m put off by that presumptuous attitude of yours.”

“Yes, I was convinced that you liked me.” Yukinoshita said without being particularly surprised. Rather, she wore her usual, unchanging cold expression.

Of course, Yukinoshita has a cute face. Cute enough that even I, who has no friends and interacts with no one in this school, know of its existence.

There is no room for doubt about the fact that she is one of the most beautiful girls in the school.

However, her self-confident behavior is abnormal.

2-3

“How were you brought up to be so naïve? Was everyday your birthday? Or was Santa Claus your lover?” If that weren’t the case, her mind wouldn’t be trapped in this delusion of happiness.

If she were to keep going at this rate, it surely wouldn’t be any different from going through a painful experience. She’d better change the way she’s going before she passes the point of no return.

It seemed some compassion from within the deep recesses of my mind surfaced. I decided to choose my words carefully and convey the message indirectly.

“Yukinoshita. You’re abnormal. You’re totally delusional. Get a lobotomy or something.”

“Is that you trying to be frank for my own good?” Yukinoshita chuckled and looked in my direction, but her eyes weren’t laughing – they were scary.

But well I didn’t say she was garbage or worthless or anything like that. She could have at least commended me for that. Frankly, if her face wasn’t cute, I’m sure I would have hit her.

“Well, considering your low social standing you may perceive me as strange. However, it’s only natural that I came to think this way.

It’s something I derived from experience.” Yukinoshita laughed with her shoulders pulled back proudly. The fact that even that kind of gesture could look good on Yukinoshita was a mystery.

“Derived from experience you say….”

She must be alluding to experiences of a romantic kind. It’s obvious if you simply consider her appearance.

“You’re talking about your super fun school life…” I murmured with a sigh.

“Yes, yes. That’s right. It would be correct to say that I’m actually leading quite a peaceful school life.“ Yukinoshita responded at once. Despite that, for some reason Yukinoshita had a distant look in her eyes and her gaze was directed away from me. Thanks to that I found myself thinking that the gentle curve of the outline of her chin to her neck was beautiful. A piece of information so worthless, I could die.

Upon watching her, I just realized something. Well, if I had just kept my cool I would have noticed it instantly but this natural born stuck up who puts herself on a pedestal couldn’t possibly maintain relationships with normal people. Therefore, there’s no way she would have something like a peaceful school life.

Maybe I should just go ahead and ask….

“Hey, do you have any friends?” As soon as I said that, Yukinoshita turned her head.

“....Well first explain where the definition of a friend begins and ends.”

“Ah, say no more. That’s a line somebody with no friends would say.”

Take it from me.

Well, in all seriousness, I have no idea what boundaries the term ‘friend’ would be defined by. I wish someone would just explain to me how a friend differs from an acquaintance. Would someone you see once be a friend and someone you see everyday a sibling? Mido faado reshi sorao?[1] Why is that last ‘o’ the only sound that’s not part of the scale? That much was bothering me.

To begin with, there is a fine line between the definition of a friend and an acquaintance. This is especially obvious between girls.

Even people in the same class seem to be ranked and classified as classmates, friends and best friends. In that case, this is about where those differences came from. But I digress.

“Well since I’d imagined you without any friends, it’s fine.”

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[1] A line from theme song of the kids’ show ‘Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Donuts’. He’s referring to the fact that the original scale ‘Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti’ doesn’t end in an ‘o’ sound but a ‘ti’ sound.

“I never said I didn't have any friends. Although, even if I didn’t have friends it’s not as though that would be disadvantageous in any way.”

“Ah yes. You’re right. You’re right.” I quickly said, evading her words as she directed scornful eyes at me.

“That is to say, why is that even though you’re well-liked by everybody, you don’t have any friends?” I asked. Yukinoshita appeared slightly miffed. After which, she averted her eyes in displeasure and spoke.

“….You would never understand.” Yukinoshita puffed her cheeks a little and looked away.

Well that’s because Yukinoshita and I are completely different people and I never know even the littlest bit about what she’s thinking. I find it difficult to understand what she says to me. No matter how hard we try, in the end we wouldn’t understand each other.

Although the one thing I could probably understand about Yukinoshita is her loneliness.

“It’s not like I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. Being alone means you can have a great time by yourself. You could even say the belief that one shouldn’t be alone is disgusting.”

"….."

Yukinoshita just looked at me for a second before she turned her face back to the front and closed her eyes. I could tell she was thinking something even from that gesture.

" Even though you like being alone, having somebody just pour their sympathy on you would be irritating. I totally get you." I said.

"I wonder why you're acting like we're on the same level. It's extremely irritating." Then as if to cover up her irritation, Yukinoshita flipped her hair back.

"Well, although you and I are of a different standard, I suppose we more or less share the same feelings in regards to being alone. Though it's a little vexing." Upon say it was vexing Yukinoshita gave a slight self-deprecating smile. Her smile seemed somehow sombre yet calm.

"What do you mean when you say we're of a different standard….I have my own opinion on being a loner. You could pretty much call me the king of the loners. On the other hand, it would be ridiculous to call someone like *you* a loner."

"What's this….bravely facing your circumstances even though you know it's futile…" Yukinoshita appeared shocked and looked at me with an expression full of amazement.

“Despite being liked by everyone you call yourself a loner. You’re a disgrace to lonely people everywhere.” I said triumphantly, satisfied with her expression.

However Yukinoshita immediately laughed with a scornful look on her face.

“Well that’s a simplistic idea. It seems like you’re only capable of simple spinal reflexes, which don’t involve your brain. I mean, what do you understand about being liked by people? Oh that’s right, you’ve never experienced it before. Sorry, that was my lack of consideration.”

“If you’re trying to be considerate then actually continue to be considerate until the end…..” Would you call that being superficially polite? She sure is a real bitch.

“So what’s it like being popular?” I asked. Yukinoshita closed her eyes as though she was thinking about it a little bit.

After clearing her throat a little, she spoke. “For someone like you, who isn’t at all popular, this may be a little unpleasant to hear.”

“I’m already fed up so don’t worry.” I replied. Yukinoshita took a deep breath in response.

I couldn’t feel any more unpleasant. I certainly had my fill from our little exchange earlier. It was as though I’d just eaten an infinite amount of ramen.

“Since I have always been cute, boys who approached me generally did so haboring feelings for me.”

I give up. It’s like she just added an extra two servings of vegetables and a serving of MSG to my ramen. But although I tried put up a front and acted all confident, I can’t just get up and go *now.* I steeled myself and waited patiently for her to continue talking.

“I believe it began during my final years of elementary school. Ever since then….” Yukinoshita’s expression was different from what it was just previously. It was a little melancholy.

It has been a little over five years now. What the hell does it even feel like to be constantly exposed to feelings of affection from the opposite sex?

Frankly, having been exposed to feelings of disgust from the opposite sex for a little over sixteen years now, I could never comprehend it. Having not even received Valentine’s Day chocolates from my own mother, it was a world I couldn’t understand. It just seems like she’s one of those people who are gleeful cause they’re winning at life. Isn’t she just making me listen to her fucking brag?

But that’s just it, isn’t it?

Although it’s about as different as a positive vector is from a negative vector in magnitude, it would be harsh to hit her with my honest feelings. It would be like standing naked in the midst of a raging storm. It would be as harsh as persecuting her in the middle of a classroom discussion.

2-4

I remember being made to stand in front of the blackboard alone as the rest of the class encircled chanting ‘Apo-lo-gize! Apo-lo-gize!’ in a loud voice as they clapped their hands. It would be a scenario similar to that hell.

…That was seriously a tough experience. It was the first and last time I have ever cried at school.

But I’m all good now.

“Well being liked has gotta be somewhat better than being constantly hated. You’re spoiled. Too spoiled.” I blurted out after that unpleasant memory just crossed my mind.

Yukinoshita gave a short sigh. It seemed a lot like she was smiling but yet her expression was clearly different.

“It’s not as if I have ever wanted to be liked by people though.” She asserted and then added only a few more words. “Otherwise, if people genuinely did like me then that would have probably been a good thing.”

“Huh?” I unconsciously asked her to repeat what she said after hearing her soft murmur. She turned around to face me wearing a serious expression.

“If you had a friend who was generally popular with girls, what would you think?”

“That’s a stupid question. I don’t have any friends so I wouldn’t need to worry about such a thing.” I gave an exceedingly forceful reply. Like a man would. Even if I do say so myself, I was surprised at how I quickly cut in with a reply before she had even finish talking.

It seemed Yukinoshita was also surprised. She was at a loss for words with her mouth hanging open.

“…..For a second, I actually thought you said something cool.” Yukinoshita gently put a hand on temple as though she had a headache, and hung her head low. “Think of it as a hypothetical and give me an answer.”

“I’d kill him.” I didn’t know if my quick reply satisfied her or not but Yukinoshita nodded her head knowingly.

“See, wouldn’t you try to eliminate that person? Just like a brute that doesn’t have any sense. No, they would have even less sense than an animal…..The school I went to had many people like that. Although I believe they were pitiful people who could only ascertain the meaning of their existence by doing those things.” Yukinoshita suddenly chortled.

Girls who are hated by girls. A category like that definitely exists. I haven’t been going to school for ten years for nothing.

It's not like I was at the center of it all but it's something you can understand just by looking at it from the outside. No, it's *because* I was looking at it from the outside that I was able to understand.

Yukinoshita was most certainly always at the center of it and as a result, without a doubt, she was surrounded by enemies in all directions. For somebody who lived like that, I can imagine the kinds of things she experienced.

"When I was in elementary school, I had my indoor shoes hidden from me about sixty times but fifty of those times were done by girls in my class."

"I'm curious about the other ten times."

"Three of the times were done by boys. Another two times was when the teacher bought them from me. For the remaining five times, a dog had stolen them."

"The percentage of times done by dogs is pretty high."

Something like that was beyond my imagination.

"But that isn't what's shocking about it."

"I was trying my best to ignore you!"

“Thanks to that, I had to take my indoor shoes home everyday and in the end I even had to take my recorder home too.” Yukinoshita said with a wearied expression. Upon seeing her expression, I involuntarily felt some sympathy towards her.

Isn’t it because of that? The fact that it’s similar to what I experienced. The fact that in elementary school, I felt guilty cause I was in the classroom at an hour nobody would be around just so I could swap the mouthpiece of my recorder.

I was just genuinely feeling sorry for Yukinoshita.

It’s true. It’s true. Hachiman. Don’t. Tell. Lies.

“That must’ve been tough for you.”

“Yes, it was tough. All because I’m cute.”

This time it didn’t irritate me when I saw Yukinoshita smile in self-deprecation.

“But it can’t be helped. Nobody is perfect. They are weak, they have ugly minds and they get jealous easily and try to bring others down. Oddly enough, the more superior you are the harder it is to live in this world. Isn’t that just wrong? That’s why I’m going to change this worlds and the people in it.” Yukinoshita’s eyes were dead serious and habored a coldness that could burn you like dry ice could.

“Isn’t too insane to be putting all your effort into some extravagant plan?”

“Maybe. But it’s considerably better than your plan to dry up, wither away and die….I hate the way that you consider your weakness as a positive.” Yukinoshita said and averted her eyes to look outside the window.

Yukinoshita Yukino is a beautiful girl. An infallible truth that even I was forced to acknowledge with the deepest regret. From the outside she seemed to be irreproachable, with grades that were excellent and faultless. However, her difficult personality is a fatal wound in her character. Such flaws are not cute at all. But there is a reason for her to have sustained that fatal wound.

I don’t blindly believe everything that Hiratsuka sensei says but by being someone who has a lot, Yukinoshita has her own miseries.

It certainly wouldn’t be hard to hide that by continuing to deceive yourself and those around you. That’s what most people in this world do. Just like how people who are good at studying get good grades in an exam and say that it was because they had a lucky guess at what was going to be in the exam. Just like how plain-looking girls who are jealous of beautiful girls assert that their ugliness is determined by how fat they are.

But Yukinoshita doesn’t do that.

She would never lie to herself.

It’s not like I won’t at least commend that attitude of hers. Because we are the same in that way.

As a result of the conversation ending, Yukinoshita looked back down at her paperback book.

As I watched her, a strange feeling suddenly overcame me.

She and I are certainly alike in some way. I found myself thinking that in spite of myself.

The silence in that moment somehow felt nice.

I felt my heart beat a little faster. It was like my heart was saying it wanted to beat faster than the ticking of the second hand and beyond.

Then…

Then she and I….

“Hey, Yukinoshita…If you want, I could be your frie-“

“I’m sorry. That is impossible.”

“Whaaaat? But I wasn’t even finished!”

Yukinoshita went ahead and flat out rejected me. And on top of that she had this look on her face like she was grossed out.

Yup this girl aint cute at all. Romantic comedies and stuff should just go blow up.

Chapter 3: Yuigahama Yui is always restless.

“So let me guess, even cooking class was a traumatic experience for you?”

For some reason I was called to the teachers’ lounge even though I handed in the home economics report to make up for skipping cooking class.

This feels a hell of a lot like déjà vu. Why are you shoving this lecture down my throat, Hiratsuka sensei?

“Sensei, aren’t you a Modern Japanese teacher?”

“I’m the school’s guidance counsellor. Tsurumi sensei pushed the responsibility to me.”

I looked to one corner of the room to see said Tsurumi sensei watering a decorative plant. Hiratsuka sensei gave her a quick glance before returning her eyes to me.

“First, I’ll hear your reason for skipping cooking class. Make it brief.”

“Well it’s just I don’t really understand why I have participate in cooking classes with the other students.…”

“That answer doesn’t make any sense to me. Hikigaya - was it that much of a painful experience to be put into groups? Or is it because nobody let you join their group?” Hiratsuka sensei looked at me as though she was sincerely worried.

“No, of course not. What are you talking about sensei? This is about cooking training right? In other words, training that would be pointless unless it bears resemblance to how cooking is conducted in real life. My mom cooks by herself. In other words, cooking is something that must be done alone! Conversely speaking, conducting cooking training in groups is wrong!”

“What you’re talking about and what I’m talking about are completely different.”

“Sensei! Are saying that my beloved mother is wrong?! Unforgivable! It’d pointless to say anything more than this! I’m outta here!” I replied and turned on my heel, attempting to leave the place behind me.

“Hey! Don’t try and make me the bad guy by storming out when I’m the one who’s supposed to angry!”

…..Did my plan fail? Hiratsuka sensei stretched out her arm and yanked the back of my collar. And soon I’m being made to face her a second time while being held up like a kitten. Damn. If I’d said ‘Heh ♪ Silly me☆’ and stuck my tongue out, I probably would have gotten away with it.

Sensei sighed and smacked my report with the back of her hand.

“’How to Make a Delicious Curry’ – that part is fine. The problem is what comes after that. ‘1. Cut onion into comb shapes. Then slice thinly and season. Just like how a shallow person is easily influenced by others, thinly sliced onions easily soak up the flavor’…..Who said to mix in sarcasm? You’re meant to mix in beef.”[1]

“Sensei please stop making a face like that was a really great pun….I’m feeling embarrassed being the one looking at you.”

“Even I don’t want to read this. You probably already know what I’m going to say but you’ll have to resubmit it.” Sensei looked completely appalled as she put a cigarette between her lips.

“Can you cook?” She then inquired with a somewhat surprised expression as she casually flipped my report over.

Well that’s irritating. High school students these days can at least make curry.

“Yes. Considering my future plans, of course I can cook.”

“Are you at the age where you want to start living on your own?”

“No, that’s not the reason.”

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[1] The word for sarcasm is 皮肉 (hiniku) and also contains the kanji for meat which is 肉 (niku).

“Hmm?” Sensei simply inquired with a look that said ‘so why?’

“Because cooking is a skill that all house-husbands require.”

Upon hearing my reply, she blinked her large eyes, which were modestly lined with mascara, two or three times.

“Do you want to become a full-time house-husband?”

“Well it’s an option…”

“Don’t talk about dreams with those sordid, corrupt eyes of yours. They should at least be sparkling with excitement…..Just for reference, how are your future plans coming along?”

It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to just tell her to freaking worry about her own future first so I resigned to giving her a reasonable answer.

“Well, I plan on going to whatever college I can get into.”

“I see.” Hiratsuka sensei nodded in agreement and sounded her approval. “And after that, what kind of employment do you intend to find?”

“I’m going to find a beautiful and distinguished woman to marry so that she’ll continue to support me till I die.”

“I asked about employment! Give me a specific job!”

“I already told you - House-husband.”

“That’s what you call a gigolo! A dreadful way to live. They hint at the possibility of marriage and then before you know it they’re in your house and they’ve even got a duplicate house key made and not to mention that they’ve started to carry their bags in and then when it’s time to break up they even take my furniture with them like some damn hobo!” Hiratsuka sensei gushed, making to sure to divulge every last detail. She was talking so vehemently that she was drawing short breaths with tears welling up in her eyes.

It was too pitiful.…So pitiful that I actually wanted to cheer her up.

“Sensei, it’s okay! I won’t be like that. I’ll do the housework properly and become a gigolo that surpasses all other gigolos!”

“What kind of crazy superstring theory is that?!”

With my future aspirations trampled on, I was forced to come to a crossroads. My dream was on the verge of being shattered so I attempted to turn the argument in my favor.

“It might sound bad if you call me a ‘gigolo’ but a full-time house-husband isn’t that bad of a choice.”

“Hmm?” Hiratsuka sensei gave me an intense stare and leaned back in her chair with a creak. A position that said ‘I’ll listen, so give me what you got.’

“Thanks to what you may call a gender equal society, it is only natural that women have already made social progress. Sensei being able to work as a teacher is proof of that.”

“…Well, I suppose you’re right.”

I think I’ve got her reeled in. Now I’ve just got to continue talking.

“However, it only takes simple math to know that for the large amount of women who have entered the workforce, the same amount of men are out of jobs. I mean, isn’t the number of jobs always limited no matter what?”

“Well…”

“Take for example a certain company fifty years ago in which a hundred percent of the labor force was comprised of a hundred males. If fifty female employees are required to work there, it follows that fifty of the existing male employees must find employment elsewhere. But that’s an extremely simple calculation.

If you consider the current economic slump, it’s only a matter of time before the employment of those male laborers falls into a state of decline.”

As I laid out my argument, Hiratsuka was stroking her chin thoughtfully.

“Keep going.”

“Companies in themselves are becoming increasingly less dependent on human labor. This is a result of the widespread use of computers and the rise of the Internet allowing optimal efficiency, which has in turn improved the rate of efficiency per capita tremendously. Or if you ask for the general opinion of the public they might even say ‘It’s nice that you’re working so hard but it’s a little unsettling….’ And then there are things like work sharing too. Well something along those lines.”

“Yes, that is an existing opinion.”

“And because house hold appliances have had remarkable developments and become more diverse, no matter who uses them, the result is still the same. Even males can do household chores properly.”

“No, wait a second.” Sensei interrupted my impassioned speech. She cleared her throat a little and immediately stared at me. “It’s kind of hard to know what to use where and where to put what…..so it’s not like it always turns out the way you want it to…”

“Well that’s probably only for you.”

“….What?” Her chair suddenly swivelled around as her foot delivered a kick to my shin. It hurt like hell. Then a burning glare was directed my way. I continued talking in an attempt to gloss over my words.

“T-the point is! Considering we’ve worked so hard to build a society where one can get by without working, harping on about working and complaining that there aren’t enough jobs is just plain absurd and wrong!”

A perfect conclusion. Work and you lose to the system. Work and you lose to the system.

“….Right. You really as rotten as ever.” Sensei sighed loudly. Then immediately after, she grinned widely and laughed as though she’d just thought of something.

“If a girl treated you to her home cooking at least once, I’m sure you would change that corrupt way of thinking….” With that sensei stood up and started shoving me by the shoulder towards the door.

“Wa-wait! What are you doing?! Ow! I said that hurts!”

“Come back when you’ve learnt the dignity of labor at the service club.” Then with a viselike grip on my shoulder, she harnessed all her strength and gave me a final shove outside the door.

And just as I was about to turn around and complain, the door was ruthlessly slammed shut. I suppose that means ‘no objections, rebuttals, questions or back-talk’.

Then as soon as I thought I might as well just ditch school, I felt a throbbing pain in my shoulder from the time sensei had clamped it just before……If I run away, I’ll probably get beaten up.

The person who wired that conditioned reflex into me in such a short period of time is a terrible human being.

Without any other choice, I decided to show up at the so-called service club of which one club activity seems to be solving riddles. Though it claims to be a club, I have no idea what club activities actually involve. Not to mention that the club president is even more of a mystery. What’s the hell’s up with her.

3-2

As per usual, Yukinoshita was reading a book.

After exchanging only a light greeting, I moved a short distance away, pulled up a chair, and sat down. Then I took some books out of my bag.

Right now, the service club had completely turned into a reading club for boys.[1] But seriously - what kind of stuff does this club do? And what the hell happened to that battle we're meant to have?

The answer to that suddenly became apparent with the sound of a visitor timidly knocking at the door. Yukinoshita stopped turning a page of her book and decidedly inserted a bookmark inside.

"Come in." She called, facing the door.

"E-excuse me," came a voice that was a little excited and may have indicated some nervousness. The door was then slid open only a little so that a small gap was apparent. The girl slipped her body in through the gap and entered the room. An action that could only mean she really didn't want anyone seeing her come in.

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[1] I think this is a reference to a series of short novels called '青年のための読書クラブ' (Seinen no Tame no Dokusho Club). It is known as 'The Reading Club for the Youth' in English.

Her shoulder length brown hair was curled in loose waves that swayed as she walked. Her eyes moved around the room anxiously until they met mine. She let out a small shriek.

….What am I? A monster?

“W-why is Hikki here?!”

“…..I’m actually a member of this club.”

Or should I say are you calling *me* ‘Hikki’? More importantly, who the hell is this chick anyway?

Frankly, I have no idea. But despite that, she looked exactly like your typical high school girl. I’ve seen her type around a lot – a flamboyant girl revelling in her youth. Short skirt, three buttons of her blouse popped, hair dyed light brown, and a quick glance at her chest revealed a heart charm on a gleaming necklace. It was an outfit that completely defied the school code.

I’ve no business with such girls. In fact, I have no business with any girls.

However, it appeared that the opposite party knew who I was and it didn’t seem like it would go down well if I’d said “Excuse me but, who may you be?”

Also, I noticed that the color of the ribbon pinned to her chest was red. In our school, each grade is distinguishable by a particularly coloured ribbon. A red ribbon meant she was in grade 11 like me.

….It’s not like I noticed because I was staring at her chest to begin with – it just happened to enter my line of sight…..By the way, they were pretty big…

“Well just sit down for the time being.” I said and casually pulled up a chair, motioning for her to sit. My random act of chivalry was not a pretence for masking my guilty conscience. I wanted to impress my genuinely kind disposition upon her of course. Because you know I am a real gentleman. The fact that I wear really sophisticated clothing is proof enough.

“Th-thank you….” She appeared bewildered as she accepted my offer and sat down quietly.

Yukinoshita, who was sitting in front of her, made eye contact. “Yuigahama Yui-san right?”

“Y-you know who I am?”

Her face, Yuigahama Yui’s, suddenly lit up when her name was called. It was like being known by Yukinoshita gave you some kind of status.

“You certainly know a lot…Do you remember everybody’s name in this school?” I asked.

“Not at all. I didn’t know you existed.”

“Is that so….”

“It’s not really something to get depressed over. In fact, it was my mistake. I didn’t notice your diminutive presence and above all I unintentionally wished to avert my eyes from your existence. The blame lies with the weakness of my mind.”

“Is that supposed some form of consolation? That’s a really lousy way to console someone. In the end, you pretty much concluded that it’s my fault.”

“I wasn’t trying to console you. I was just being sarcastic.” Yukinoshita said, disregarding me as she flipped her hair over her shoulder.

“This sorta….seems like a really fun club.” Yuigahama said as she looked at Yukinoshita and me with twinkling eyes.

….This girl – Is her mind just full of sunshine and daisies?

“That remark isn’t particularly pleasing in any way…on the other hand, your misunderstanding is terribly *dis*pleasing.” Yukinoshita shot her a cold glare. As Yuigahama registered her words, she became flustered and frantically waved her hands in denial.

“Uh, no, how do I put it? I was just thinking that you guys seem to be acting really natural! Like I mean, Hikki is like totally different from how he’s like in class. He’s like actually talking and stuff.”

“No I can talk…saying that is a little…” Do I really look like I lack any communication skills?

“Oh that’s right. Yuigahama-san is also in class F.”

“What? Really?“ I asked.

“Don’t tell me you really didn’t know that?” Yukinoshita asked in return.

Yuigahama appeared startled by Yukinoshita’s words.

Oh hell.

I know the misery of a classmate not remembering who you are more than anyone. Therefore before making her experience that same misery, I attempted to cover up my mistake.

“O-of course I know.”

“….Why are you averting your eyes?” Yukinoshita asked.

Yuigahama looked at me with scornful eyes. “Well isn’t that why, Hikki, you don’t have any friends in class? I mean you act weird and it’s creepy.”

Oh that’s right, I remember this girl’s scornful eyes. Of course, the other girls in my class have also occasionally looked at me like I was piece of shit. She must be part of that clique that hangs around the soccer club a lot.

What the hell. Isn't she one of my enemies then? I just wasted my time trying to be nice.

“…..This bitch.” I inadvertently swore under my breath.

“What? Who are you calling a bitch?!” Yuigahama lashed out in response. “I’m still a vir-….. w-woah! Never mind!” She blushed furiously and waved her hands back and forth in an attempt to take back her words. What an airhead.

Yukinoshita began to say something as if to save Yuigahama from her panic. "It's not really something to be embarrassed about. At this age being a virg-"

"W-woah hold up! What are you saying?! It's embarrassing still being one in grade 11! Yukinoshita-san, where's your sense of femininity?!"

"…..A pointless thing to value."

Woah there, I don't know how but Yukinoshita just increased her coldness a hundred fold.

"Even if you say that, the word 'femininity' just screams 'bitch' to me." I added in.

"You said it again! Calling someone a bitch is way out of line! Hikki, you're so gross!" Yuigahama made a small derisive growl and looked at me with teary eyes.

"Me calling you a bitch has nothing to do with being gross. And don't call me 'Hikki'." Isn't that exactly like calling me a hikikomori?[2]……Oh, she must've meant it as an insult in that way. That must be some kind of derogatory nickname people in my class have for me.

…..Isn't that too mean? I was about to start tearing up at that.

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[2] A hikikomori is someone who is socially withdrawn.

Gossiping isn’t any good.

That’s why I say things upfront and loud and clear. Because if they don’t hear me it from me directly, I can’t inflict any damage!

“You bitch.”

“Y-you! You’re so annoying! Like seriously gross! Can’t you just go fucking die?!”

Upon hearing those words, even I being so mild I’d get as irritated as a safety razor could make you, was forced into silence.

There are a lot of words in this world that shouldn’t be said. In particular, this is greatly reinforced by words concerning other peoples’ lives. If you aren’t prepared to take responsibility for taking someone’s life then you don’t have the right to say those things. With the intent to reprimand her, after a moment of silence, I gave a solemn response with a markedly furious tone.

“You shouldn’t say things like ‘go die’ or ‘I’ll kill you’ so lightly or I’ll make you bite the dust.”

“….Uh…, s-sorry. I didn’t mean to…..wait what?! You just said it now! You totally said you’d kill me!”

She might've noticed but Yuigahama is really just an airhead. But what was surprising was that she seemed like the kind of girl who could actually apologize properly.

She seemed a little different from what I'd envisioned judging by her appearance. I was certain she would be the same as the girls in her group and not to mention those guys in the soccer club and the people around them. I thought her head would always be filled with thoughts of sex, drugs and fooling around. Like some kind of Murakami Ryuu novel.[3]

Yuigahama let out a small sigh as though being hyper made her tired.

"…..Hey um I heard this from Hiratsuka sensei but this club fulfils students' desires right?" Yuigahama broke the short moment of silence.

"For real?" I put in. I was sure that this was a club for reading books to no end. Yukinoshita completed ignored my question and answered Yuigahama's.

"I believe it differs a little. Ultimately, the aim of this club only lies in lending people a hand. Whether or not that fulfils your desires depends upon you." Yukinoshita's blunt denial seemed somewhat cold.

"How is it different?" Yuigahama asked with a dubious expression. That was exactly what I was wondering.

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[3] Murakami Ryuu is an author who wrote a novel called 'Almost Transparent Blue' that deals with the issue of promiscuity and drug use among Japanese youth.

“Would you give a hungry man a fish or would you teach him how to fish? That is where the difference lies. Essentially, a volunteer does not provide results but a methodology. I suppose ‘ to encourage independence’ would be the most accurate answer.”

Her speech seemed like something pulled straight out of a textbook on morals. An empty principle any goddamn school would preach - ‘club activities that allow students to demonstrate their ability to act independently as well as with others’. I’m sure my general understanding of the club’s activities as that would be correct. And well, sensei also said something or rather about labor so it must be a club that works for the sake of the student body.

“That’s kinda really awesome!” Yuigahama exclaimed with a look that said ‘You opened my eyes so I totally get it now!’ I was a little worried that she might get brainwashed by some satanic religion in the future.

Yukinoshita’s explanation held no basis in science yet big breasted girls are often the ones who….or so goes one such existing opinion in society but I believe I could say that she is the first example of that.

On the other hand, with a chest as flat as a wall, sharp intelligence and unrivalled sagacity was Yukinoshita.

“Although I cannot say for sure that I will fulfil your wishes, I will help you as much as I can.”

Upon hearing those words, Yuigahama spoke up as though she'd suddenly remembered what she had come here for.

"Hey! Um I was kind of thinking about making some cookies…." Yuigahama said and glanced at me.

I'm not really a cookie you know. I get that in class people treat me like I'm not even there but even those words sound the same, they're different.

"Hikigaya-kun." Yukinoshita said and motioned toward the hallway with a quick jerk of her chin – a gesture that told me to get lost. She could have said it nicely without doing that by saying 'You're an eyesore so could you please leave? I would appreciate it if you never came back again.'

If you need to have some kind of girl talk then there's no helping it. There are indeed things in this world that can only be discussed between girls. I could take a hint like 'Physical Education', 'No males allowed', 'Classroom in use for a female only lesson'. That about sums it up.

….By those female only lessons, I wonder what kind of lessons they were….It still bugs me to this day.

"….I'll just go buy some 'Sportop'."

I must say I’m being very considerate, having sensed the situation and acted discreetly. If I were a girl, I would have definitely fallen in love with me.

As I put my hand on the door to leave, Yukinoshita called out to me. Maybe even Yukinoshita had some feelings to express.

“I’ll have a ‘Yasai seikatsu 100 Strawberry Mix’.”

To think that she can just naturally command people to do errands for her. Yukinoshita-san, you’re freaking unbelievable.

3-3

It wouldn’t take more than ten minutes to get from the third floor to the first floor of the special building and back again. If I took my time and walked at a leisurely pace, their conversation would probably be finished by the time I got there.

Well, I no matter kind of person she was, Yuigahama was our first client. In other words, her appearance marked the beginning of the so-called battle between Yukinoshita and me.

Well, it’s not like I’m going to win so if I just concerned myself with figuring out how to minimise as much damage as possible, all would be good.

In front of the school canteen there was a suspicious vending machine. It sold some peculiar kinds of soda in juice boxes that you can’t find at regular convenience stores. They seem to be pretty good at replicating flavors so they’ve caught my interest.

I was particularly interested in a soda called ‘Sportop,’ which goes against the norm. It has a flavor like that of cheap candy and challenges the latest ‘zero calories’ and ‘sugar-free’ trends. It tastes pretty good.

As I inserted two hundred yen coins into the vending machine, it groaned loudly like it some sky fortress about to let drop the ‘Yasai Seikatsu’ and ‘Sportop’ I purchased. Then, I inserted another hundred yen coin in and pressed the ‘Otoko no Café au Lait’ button.

It would be weird if only two out of three people were drinking something. So I’d decided to buy something for Yuigahama too.

The drinks were 300 yen in total meaning I had lost fifty percent of the money I had on me. I was way too broke.

3-4

“You’re late,” Yukinoshita said, snatching the ‘Yasai Seikatsu’ from my hands. She poked a straw in it and started drinking. All that was left was the ‘Sportop’ and ‘Otoko no Café au Lait.’

It seemed like Yuigahama realized who the ‘Otoko no Café au Lait’ was for.

“... Oh right,” she said, pulling a hundred yen coin out of a pocket-like coin purse.

“Ah, don’t worry about it.”

I mean, Yukinoshita didn’t pay me back, and above all, I bought them of my own volition. Even though it might have been reasonable to accept money from Yukinoshita, I was not obliged to accept money from Yuigahama. So instead of taking the hundred yen coin she held out, I placed the Café au Lait in her hand.

“B-But I haven’t paid you back!” Yuigahama adamantly attempted to hand me the coin. It would have been annoying to argue back and forth about her paying me back so I just walked over to my seat closer to Yukinoshita.

Yuigahama appeared slightly miffed as she reluctantly put away her change.

“... Thanks.” She expressed her gratitude in a small voice, laughing a little happily as she shyly held the Café au Lait in both hands.

That was most certainly the most gratitude I’ve ever received in my entire life. She had probably overpaid me with that smiling face for what was worth only a hundred yen.

“Have you finished your chat?” Satisfied, I attempted to get Yukinoshita to show me some appreciation as well.

“Yes. As a result of your absence, our conversation went along swimmingly. Thanks.”

That was most certainly the least gratitude I’ve ever received in my entire life.

“…Well, that’s good. So, what are you going to do now?”

“We’re going to the home economics room. You’re coming with us.”

“The home economics room?”

It was an iron maiden-like classroom for the torture of cooking training conducted in groups of your own choosing.

They have kitchen knives and gas ranges, which are dangerous and should have restricted use!

“And what are we going to do there?”

Along with gym class and field trips, cooking training was one of the top three school activities known for trauma infliction. There probably wasn’t a single person who actually enjoyed any one of them. I mean, imagine a group that is happily chatting among themselves and getting along well…then imagine the immediate silence that fell over them the moment I had joined…yeah, it was beyond unbearable.

“Cookies… I want to bake some cookies.”

“Huh? Cookies?” It was the only response I could give her, having had no idea what she was talking about.

“It appears that Yuigahama-san wants to make homemade cookies for someone. However, she has no confidence in her ability and would like some help. That is her request,” Yukinoshita explained, clearing my doubt.

“Why do we have to do that?… Get your friends to help you with something like that.”

“Um… W-well, it’s just that… I don’t really want them to know and if they knew about it, they’d make fun of me… Something serious like this wouldn’t sit well with them…” Yuigahama’s eyes darted about as she answered.

I let a small sigh slip.

Frankly, peoples' love problems aren't easy to deal with. Rather than knowing who likes who, memorizing even one English word would be much more useful to me. Considering that, helping her with her love problems is out of the question. And well, I don’t have any interest in such love stories beyond being made to think about them.

Now that I think about it… That serious talk they had… It must have been about this…

Boy, am I relieved.

Honestly, to somebody with love problems, all you need to say is, ‘Don’t give up! It’ll definitely go well!’ And if it doesn’t go well, then all you need to say is, ‘That guy is seriously, like, the biggest jerk ever!’

“Hah,” I inadvertently snorted as my eyes met Yuigahama’s.

“Ah...” Yuihagama looked downward, at a loss for words. She then gripped the hem of her skirt, her shoulders trembling slightly. “Ah…Ahaha.

It-it’s weird, isn’t it? Someone like me trying to make homemade cookies…like I’m trying to be some kind of girly girl… Sorry, Yukinoshita-san, it’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, if that’s what you really want, I don’t particularly mind… —Oh, I see. If you’re worried about him, you don’t have to be. He doesn’t exactly have a moral compass so I’ll force him to help out.”

Somehow it seemed like the Japanese constitution didn’t apply to me. I mean, what kind of sweatshop-type exploitation was this?

“No, it’s really okay! I mean making cookies really doesn’t suit me and it would be weird… I asked Yumiko and Mari and they said it’s totally old-fashioned.” Yuigahama stole a glance at me.

“...Yes. I certainly wouldn’t expect that a girl who looks as flamboyant as you do would make cookies,” Yukinoshita said, as if to push the already crestfallen Yuigahama further into depression.

“E-exactly! It’s weird, isn’t it?!” Yuigahama laughed anxiously as if she was waiting for us to react. Her downcast eyes suddenly looked to me, as though she was challenging me. With those eyes looking at me, I felt like she was asking me for some kind of reply.

“...Well, what I want to say is not...that it’s weird, or that it doesn’t suit you, or that it’s not in your personality. I really just couldn’t care less.”

“That’s an even more horrible thing to say!” Yuigahama struck the table hard in exasperation. “Hikki, I really can’t believe you! I’m seriously pissed off. I would do it if I put my mind to it!”[1]

“That’s not something you can say about yourself. That’s something your mom says, while getting emotional – tears in her eyes and all. ‘I always thought you would do it if you could...but of course you just can't'”

“Well, it looks like your mom already gave up on you!”

“A reasonably good conclusion.” Yukinoshita nodded her head eagerly. Meanwhile, Yuigahama had tears welling up in her eyes.

Oh, leave me alone. Although of course, being given up on is also sad, I guess.

I felt bad for being a killjoy when Yuigahama was clearly determined to make those cookies. Not to mention there was still that battle between Yukinoshita and me.

“Well, the only thing I can make is curry, but I’ll still help you.” I reluctantly offered my assistance.

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[1] The original phrase used here is 'yareba dekiru ko', which can refer to someone who can do it if they try. However, thanks to the ambiguity of Japanese phrases, it can also be used in a negative sense to mean somebody who can't do anything at all, even if they try. Yuigahama uses it in the first sense and Hikigaya uses it in the second sense.

“...Th-thanks.” Yuigahama gave a sigh of relief.

“We aren’t really expecting anything with regards to your cooking ability. We just want you to taste the cookies and tell us your opinion.”

Well, if it was as Yukinoshita said and a male’s perspective was required, there was obviously something I could do. There is an innumerable amount of males who dislike sweet foods so my help will be required when trying to match a male’s sense of taste. Not to mention that I’m an honest person when it comes to saying whether or not something is delicious.

...Would that come in handy?

3-5

The home economics room was now enveloped in the smell of vanilla essence.

Yukinoshita opened the refrigerator with confidence and took out some milk and eggs. She grabbed a scale, a bowl and some other things, then started to prepare the eggs. She was using some strange cooking utensil that I wasn't well-acquainted with.

It seemed that this perfect superhuman[1] was, somehow, also unbelievably good at cooking.

She put on an apron once she had finished those quick preparations, as if to say that the real cooking was about to start. Yuigahama also wore an apron, but she wore it like a first-timer; she had tied the strings into a messy, tangled knot.

"Your apron's tangled. Do you honestly not know how to wear one?"

"Sorry. Thanks… Wait, what?! I can at least wear an apron, you know!"…

"In that case, please put it on properly. If you don't do things correctly, you'll end up like him--someone way past the point of no return."

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[1] Reference to the superhumans from the manga Kinnikuman.

“Don’t use me as a negative example--what am I, Namahage?”[2]

“Well, it’s the first time you’ve actually been helpful to someone, so be a little happier about it… Oh, but don't worry: even if you compare yourself to Namahage, I don’t really have anything against your scalp.”

“I wasn’t even worrying to begin with…Stop it. Don’t look at my hair with that pitying smile.” In an attempt to evade her smile-–an expression she would normally never show--I held my hair back from my hairline.

I heard Yuigahama giggle. Unsurprisingly, she was still trying to put on her apron as she watched the little exchange between Yukinoshita and me from afar.

“You still haven’t tied it? Or is it because you can’t put it on? …Good grief, just come over here. I’ll tie it for you.” Yukinoshita rolled her eyes as she beckoned Yuigahama over with a quick wave of her hand.

“…I think its fine,” Yuigahama murmured as if she was a little hesitant, looking back and forth between Yukinoshita and me. She looked like a lost, anxious kid.

“Hurry up.” Yukinoshita’s cold tone shattered Yuigahama’s hesitation. I didn’t know if she was angry or not, but it was a little scary.

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[2] Namahage are men dressed up as demonic monsters to scare children who are guilty of bad behavior. I’m not sure what the scalp thing is about but I believe it’s because ‘namahage’ means ‘scalper’ as in a person who removes someone’s scalp.

“S-s-s-sorry!” Yuigahama squeaked, walking over to Yukinoshita. What was she, a puppy?

Yuknoshita moved behind her and retied her strings at once.

“Yukinoshita-san… It’s kind of like you’re my onee-chan, huh?”

“My little sister wouldn’t have turned out as bad as you.” Yukinoshita sighed and looked displeased, but, to my surprise, I actually agreed with Yuigahama.

If you put the mature Yukinoshita next to the baby-faced Yuigahama, they seemed relatively similar to sisters. In any case, it felt a hell of a lot like there was definitely something familial between them.

On another note, since only middle-aged men would say that wearing nothing but an apron looked nice, I thought that wearing uniform under an apron was best.

I felt my heart warm up at that thought and unconsciously smirked.

“H-hey, Hikki…”

“W-what?” My voice cracked.

Crap… I probably just put on a really gross face just then. And that inadvertent, nervous reply just dramatically increased that grossness.

“W-what do you think of girls who are good at home economics?”

“Well, I don’t exactly dislike them. It’s not as if guys always find that attractive.”

“I-I see…” Upon hearing that, Yuigahama smiled in relief. “Alright! Let’s do this!” She rolled up her sleeves, cracked the eggs and starting beating them. She added wheat flour, followed by sugar, butter and some flavorings including vanilla essence.

Even I, someone not well-versed in the art of cooking, could clearly see that Yuigahama’s abilities were far from normal. I’m sure she thought that merely making cookies was something extravagant, but since it was actually something very simple, it was easy to see how far from normal her competence was. There was nothing to conceal them, and so her true abilities were on full display.

First, the beaten egg still had some eggshell in there. Second, the flavouring was clumping together. Third, the butter was still hard.

And as expected, she had switched the flour and the salt and was pouring vanilla essence into a bowl that was already overflowing with milk.

I quickly looked to Yukinoshita to see her going pale as she put a hand on her forehead. Even I, with my lack of cooking skills, felt a shiver down my spine. To Yukinoshita, who was good at cooking, this must have been an absolute abomination.

As I quickly looked at Yukinoshita, I could see her go pale and put a hand on her forehead. This made even a poor chef like myself shiver. To Yukinoshita, someone who was good at cooking, this must have been an absolute abomination.

“Now we need…” Yuigahama trailed off, then retrieved some instant coffee.

“Coffee? Well, I suppose if there was something to drink the food’ll go down easier… Isn’t that a good idea?”

“Huh? That’s not it--it’s a secret ingredient. Boys don’t like sweet things, right?” Yuigahama turned to face me as she continued working. With her gaze directed away from her hands, a black mound had formed in the middle of the bowl before she knew it.

“It sure isn’t a secret ingredient now…”

“What? Ack. Well, I’ll just add some more flour to fix it.” With that, she made a white mound next to the black one. Then she engulfed the whole thing in a tidal wave of beaten eggs, raising some kind of hellish thing.

I’ll start from my conclusion: Yuigahama’s cooking skills were severely lacking. It wasn’t about whether or not they were adequate--she never had any skills to begin with. She went beyond clumsiness; she was making something so hopelessly ordinary, but she still wasn’t someone fit to do it. She was the only person I wouldn’t want to be my science lab partner, someone incompetent enough to get herself killed.

By the time the thing was done baking, it had become some kind of completely charred hot cake. I could tell from smell alone that it was bitter.

“W-why?” Yuigahama stared in horror at the abomination in front of her.

“I just don’t understand… How is it even possible to make mistake after mistake…” Yukinoshita murmured. I wondered if she was speaking quietly just so that Yuigahama wouldn’t hear. Either way, she seemed to have let it slip in her impatience.

Yuigahama took the abomination and arranged it on a plate. “It might look like this, but… We won’t know until we’ve tasted it!”

“You’re right--we’ve even got someone here to do the taste testing.”

I guffawed at that. “Yukinoshita. That’s a strange blunder to make…This is what you’d call poison testing.”

“How is this poison?! …Poison… Yeah, maybe it is poisonous after all?” Despite her confident retort, she appeared somehow anxious; she cocked her head to one side, as if to ask, ‘What do you think?’

There was obviously nothing to say to that. I broke away from Yuigahama’s puppy-like expression and instead turned to draw Yukinoshita’s attention.

“Hey, am I really going to eat this? This is just like the charcoal they sell at Joyful Honda.”

“You should be fine--we haven’t used any inedible ingredients. Well, mostly. And--” Yukinoshita paused before whispering, “I’ll also be eating it, so it’s fine.”

“For real? Are you, perchance, actually a nice person? Or do you like me?”

“…On second thought, please eat it all and go kill yourself.”

“My bad… I was so in shock that I blurted something weird.”

As expected from sweets[3]… Though, that said, it was questionable to refer to the abomination in front of us that way.

“I asked you to taste-test, not to deal with something like this. Furthermore, I am the one who accepted her request. I’ll at least take responsibility.” Yukinoshita pulled the plate over to her side. “If we don’t establish what’s wrong with it, we won’t be able to deal with the situation properly. Although that’s not to say that we should take risks simply for knowledge's sake…”

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[3] There’s a pun here. “Okashi” means both “weird” and “sweets” in Japanese (of course the kanji is different, but the pronunciation is the same). So he said something “okashi” about “okashi.” Hurr hurr hurr.

Yukinoshita picked up some of the blackened abominations, which could even be mistaken for iron ore, and looked at me. Her eyes seemed to be a little teary. “We won’t die, right?”

“That’s what I want to know…” I said and looked to Yuigahama; she was watching us like she wanted to join in.

…Perfect. It’d be good if she ate it as well. Learn the pain of others.

3-6

We barely managed to eat Yuigahama’s cookies. If it was like a manga, then as soon as we finished eating them, we would have fallen sick and thrown up. In reality, they were so disgusting that I thought I’d prefer to just pass out. I would have happily fallen ill if it meant I didn’t have to eat those cookies ever again.

A thought then crossed my mind: did she put some fish intestines in there or something? But I guess it was only that bad, so at least it didn’t kill us right away. However, if you think about it in the long run, it wouldn’t be implausible to consider that its carcinogenic effects may manifest long after it has been ingested.

“Urgh… It’s bitter and gross…” Yuigahama said crunching on it with tears in her eyes. Yukinoshita immediately handed her a teacup.

“It’s better if you wash it down and try to avoid chewing as much as possible. And be careful not to let your tongue touch them. They are, after all, much like a potent poison.”

Don’t go and say horrible things so easily, god damn it.

Yukinoshita poured hot water from a furiously-boiling kettle and made some black tea. Once we finally got through our assigned amounts of cookies, we drank it to rid ourselves of the foul taste. Then everything finally felt normal, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Then Yukinoshita opened her mouth. Did she want to disrupt our relaxed atmosphere? "Well then, let's think about how to improve these results."

"How about Yuigahama never cooks again?"

"I’ve been completely rejected?!"

"Hikigaya-kun, that would be our last resort."

"Last resort? So that’s actually an option?!" Yuigahama quickly went from shocked to despondent. Her shoulders drooped, crestfallen, as she let out a deep sigh. "I guess cooking just isn't for me after all… Would you call it a talent? A talent that I just don't have."

Yukinoshita let out a short sigh in response. "…I see. I've thought of a solution."

"Let's hear it then," I prompted her.

"Simply work harder," Yukinoshita calmly answered.

"You call that a solution?" As far as I was concerned, that was the worst solution ever. At this point, there was nothing she could do but try her best, because there were no other options to consider. Conversely, that only meant one thing: we were at wits' end.

To be blunt, it was always going to be a pointless venture.

It would be so much easier if she'd just say, 'There's no hope, let's stop.' Trying so hard, pointlessly putting effort into this, was way beyond futile. If Yukinoshita did break the news to her and just say that she was doomed, then she could put all that time and labor into other things--that would be much more efficient.

"Hard work is an excellent solution--if we do it the right way, that is," Yukinoshita said as if she had read my mind. Did she have extrasensory perception or something? "Yuigahama-san, you said you didn't have any talent, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah."

"Please rid yourself of that idea. Those who do not exert the least amount of effort are unqualified to envy the talented. Those who cannot succeed are unable to because they cannot imagine the painstaking accumulation of hard work by those who do." Yukinoshita's words were bitter. They were so undeniably true that there was no room for rebuttal.

Yuigahama was at a loss for words; she must've never had anyone hit her with the truth like that. An expression of bewildered panic crossed her face until she covered it up with a grin.

“B-but, uh, people don’t really do this sort of thing these days… It definitely doesn’t suit me, not at all.”

Just as Yuigahama's shy laughter died down, there was a sound of a cup clinking as it was put down. It could only have been a very quiet, small sound, yet it rang out crystal clear, forcibly drawing our gaze in its direction. There sat Yukinoshita, radiating a cheerful aura.

"…Please stop trying to conform to those around you… It's terribly unpleasant. Isn't it embarrassing to place the blame for your lack of ability, your clumsiness, and your foolishness on others?" Yukinoshita's voice was strong. She was so obviously disgusted that even I was taken aback, surprised enough to let out a quiet 'W-whoa…'

The overwhelmed Yuigahama fell into silence. She hung her head low, so I couldn't read her face very well, but the way her hand gripped the edge of her skirt betrayed her emotions.

She was definitely an adept communicator--after all, she hung out with the popular kids, and that required both simple good looks and people skills. In other words, she was good at adjusting herself to other people… But that could also mean she simply lacked the courage to be herself if it meant she had to risk ending up all alone.

On the hand, Yukinoshita was just as determined to walk down her own path. She was certainly headstrong in that respect.

When you considered their preferences regarding being alone, you saw that they were each an entirely different kind of girl. If we were talking about who held more power, Yukinoshita was clearly the stronger one. It was a fair argument.

Yuigahama’s eyes were tearing up.

“I-i….”

I wondered if she was trying to say, ‘I’m going home.’ Her involuntary, faint speech made it sound as if she was about to cry. Her shoulders trembled, so her voice helplessly trembled too.

“Incredible…”

“Huh?!” Yukinoshita and I chorused. What the heck was this girl saying…? We inadvertently exchanged looks.

“You really just say it straight… And that’s just, well… It’s really cool…” Yuigahama was eager as she stared at Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita’s expression stiffened, and she fell back two steps.

“J-just what are you saying… Did you even hear me? I’m fairly certain my words were quite harsh.”

“No way! Not at all! Well, I mean, your words were harsh and honestly, I was a little taken aback.”

Yes, that’s quite true… Frankly, I didn't think Yukinoshita would say something like that to one of her fellow female peers.

Harsh didn't seem enough to describe those words, so I was considerably taken aback. Though I’m sure that Yuigahama was more than just 'taken aback.'

“But I really think you were just being honest with me. I mean, even when you were talking to Hikki, you two were only exchanging mean things, but you talked to each other properly. I’ve only ever tried to fit in and say what was expected of me, so this is a first for me…”

Yuigahama didn’t run away. “I’m sorry. I’ll do it again properly.” Once she had apologized, she faced Yukinoshita head on.

“…” To my surprise, this time it was Yukinoshita who was at a loss for words. It was probably the first time Yukinoshita had experienced something like that. There are unexpectedly few people who do the right thing and actually apologize. Most just go deep red in the face and get really angry.

Yukinoshita suddenly turned her head sideways and brushed her fingers through her hair. That motion that said she was looking for something to say but couldn’t find anything. Man… She seriously sucks at ad-libbing.

“…Teach her the right way to make them. Yuigahama, make sure you actually pay attention to what she says.” Once I broke the silence between them, Yukinoshita let out a short sigh and nodded in assent.

“I’ll make one model batch, so you can try and make it exactly like I do.” Yukinoshita stood up and quickly began preparations.

She rolled up her sleeves, broke some eggs into a bowl and then began to beat them. She sifted in a precisely-weighed amount of wheat flour and mixed it together so that it wouldn’t clump, then she added sugar, butter, and flavorings, such as vanilla essence.

Her skill greatly exceeded Yuigahama’s. She had made the cookie dough in the blink of an eye, then she started cutting it into circles, stars and heart shapes with a cookie cutter. There was already baking paper laid out on a baking tray. She carefully placed the dough on the tray and placed it in a preheated oven.

A short time later, an ineffably nice smell filled the room. It was easy to infer that if prior preparations were done perfectly, the end result would be good. And as expected, the baked cookies were a sight for sore eyes. Yukinoshita put them onto plates and handed them out.

They were baked a beautiful light brown and were definitely what one would call ‘cookies’. They were well-made, just like my aunt’s cookies. They deserved gratitude.

As soon as I took one and put it in my mouth, my face naturally broke into a smile.

“So good! What kind of pâtissier are you?” I let my true impressions slip. I couldn’t stop my hands and put another one in my mouth. It was delicious, of course.

I probably wouldn’t be able to ever experience eating a girl's handmade cookies again, so I took the opportunity to put another one in my mouth. (Yuigahama’s weren't exactly cookies, so they didn’t count.)

“They’re really good… Yukinoshita-san, you’re amazing.”

“Thank you.” Yukinoshita smiled without any hint of sarcasm. “But, you see, I just followed the recipe exactly. Therefore, you should be able to make them the same way. If it doesn’t work out, then there’s probably some other reason for that.”

“Well, can’t I just use these cookies?”

“Then it won’t mean anything. So, Yuigahama-san, let’s do our best.”

“Y-yes… Do you think I can really do it? Can I really make cookies like you?”

“Of course. If you follow the recipe, that is.” Yukinoshita didn’t forget to warn her. Thus did Yuigahama’s second attempt begin.

Just like a rehash of Yukinoshita’s version, Yuigahama used the same process and the same actions. Well, she really is only re-baking the cookies, so… That was a pretty tasteful pun.[1] I was sure that the finished cookies would also be quite tasty… I just kept pulling those puns out of nowhere.

However…

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[1] The word for 'rehash' in Japanese literally means 're-bake', hence the double meaning.

"Yuigahama-san, that's not how you do it. When you sift the flour, try and make a more circular shape… A circle, I said, a circle. Do you understand? Didn't you learn about circles in elementary school?"

"When you mix the ingredients, make sure you hold the bowl down properly. The bowl is also turning, so you're not mixing the ingredients at all. Don't stir, fold through the mixture."

"No, no, you're doing it wrong. You don't need to add that to enhance the flavour. We can add things like canned peaches next time. If you add something that holds a lot of water, the dough will die. It won't be redeemable."

Yukinoshita--the Yukinoshita Yukino--was confused. She was totally distressed.

When the dough finally, somehow, managed to get into the oven, she heaved a sigh. Her usual audacity had vanished, and a bead of sweat ran down her forehead.

When the oven was opened, a nice aroma emerged, closely resembling Yukinoshita's previous batch of cookies. However…

"They're somehow different…" Despondent, Yuigahama's shoulders dropped.

Tasting them showed that they were clearly different from Yukinoshita's. Nonetheless, they well and truly deserved to be called 'cookies'.

Compared to that charcoal-like thing before, they were so much better… Honestly, I didn't really mind eating them.

"…How should I instruct you so that you understand?" Puzzled, Yukinoshita tilted her head in thought.

When I watched her, I realized that the reason was obvious: she was just terrible at explaining things.

To be frank, Yukinoshita was a genius, and therefore there’s no way she could even begin to understand the feelings of normal people. She simply couldn’t understand what caused them to fail.

You could say that following a recipe exactly is like using a formula in mathematics. People who are bad at mathetmatics can’t understand why the formula exists, and they can’t understand how the formula can be used to arrive at an answer.

Yukinoshita just can’t understand why Yuigahama can’t understand. If I said that to her, it would probably sound like I was trying to say that she was in the wrong. I wasn’t. Yukinoshita tried her best; the problem was Yuigahama.

“Why didn’t they turn out right? …Even after I made them just like you told me to.” She looked downright stupefied as she reached out for a cookie.

If you believe that people who are truly smart should be good at teaching others, no matter how stupid the student, then you're wrong. No matter what you say to an idiot, they're just plain stupid, so they won't understand. You can explain it to them countless times, but that ditch in their minds just won't fill up.

"Mhmm… They really are different than yours, Yukinoshita-san." Yuigahama was disheartened and Yukinoshita had buried her head in her hands.

As I watched their predicament, I munched on another cookie. "Hey, uh, I've been thinking: why are you guys trying to make delicious cookies?"

"What?" Yuigahama looked at me, and her expression said, 'What the hell are you saying, you virgin?' It was a pretty condescending face, so I got a little annoyed.

"Are you such a slut that you don't understand anything? Are you stupid?"

"I told you to stop calling me a slut!"

"You really don't understand the first thing about how guys think."

"There's no way I could! I've never even gone out with anyone before! Well, I mean, a lot of my friends have boyfriends… So I was just following what they do, and this is how it turned out…" Yuigahama's voice grew quieter and quieter as I listened, to the point where I couldn't hear her at all.

Speak clearly, okay? Clearly. Are you trying to emulate me how I act when the teacher picks on me in class?

“The state of Yuigahama’s lower half isn’t the problem here. What are you trying to say in the end, Hikigaya-kun?”

Well, what’s with ‘lower half…’ These days, I don’t even see that expression on the posters inside trains. Just how old are you?

I paused for dramatic effect then laughed boastfully, as if I had the upper hand. "Hah… It seems as though the two of you have not had the pleasure of eating real home-made cookies. Come here after ten minutes, and then I'll let you taste 'real' home-made cookies.”

"What did you say…? What a wonderful proposition. I'm looking forward to it, you know!" Maybe she found it offensive that I had rejected her cookies, but Yuigahama said that, dragged Yukinoshita with her and disappeared into the hallway.

Well, then… It was my turn to make a move in this battle. In other words, it was the point that would decide the final and ultimate solution to this problem.

3-7

The home economics room was soon enveloped by an ominous atmosphere.

"Are these the 'real' homemade cookies? They're unevenly shaped and burnt here and there. They're…" Yukinoshita stared dubiously at the things in front of her.

Then Yuigahama suddenly moved her head, peering at them from the side. "Hah, you talk big, but there's nothing special about these. Hilarious! They aren't even fit to eat!" She suddenly gave a derisive laugh… Or, rather, a roar of laughter. Damn you… You'd better remember saying that.

"Well, before you say that, please, try them." I kept a relaxed smile as I tried to keep the corners of my mouth from twitching. With that smile, I pretended to believe that my preparations were flawless--that I hadn't expected criticism, that I was absolutely certain of my victory.

"Well, if you're going to go that far…" Yuigahama timidly put a cookie in her mouth. Yukinoshita also took one without saying anything.

There was a pleasant crunching noise, then immediate silence. It was doubtlessly the calm before the storm.

"Th-this is!" Yuigahama's eyes widened as she searched for the right words to express the taste.

"They're not really anything special… I mean, some parts are pretty hard to chew! They're not really that delicious, seriously!" Her emotions turned a full 360 as she went from surprised to furious. It might have been because of her huge mood swing, but… Yuigahama sent a glare my way.

The silent Yukinoshita looked at me suspiciously. It seemed as though she had somehow figured it out…

I noted both of their expressions, and then I gently lowered my eyes.

"I see. So they aren't delicious… Even after I tried my best."

"--Ah… Sorry." Yuigahama awkwardly lowered her eyes to the floor when she saw my downcast gaze.

"I guess I'll throw them out." I snatched the plate, then turned to walk away.

"P-please, wait."

"…what is it now?"

Yuigahama had grabbed my hand to stop me. She didn't let go or answer me; instead, she grabbed one of the uneven cookies and put it in her mouth. Then she bit down on it, grinding her teeth together.

"They're not really bad enough to throw away… And they're not as gross as I said they were."

"…I see. Then, are you satisfied with them?" I cracked a smile, and Yuigahama silently nodded before quickly looking away. The light of the sunset streamed through the window, making her face seem red.

"Well, to be honest, those are the cookies you made earlier…" I told her the truth nonchalantly, without flinching. I hadn't ever said that I'd made them, so I hadn't lied.

"…huh?" Yuigahama raised her voice. Her eyes widened and her mouth hung open… In other words, she was an airhead. "W-what?" Yuigahama blinked her eyes. Yukinoshita and I exchanged glances; it seemed that Yuigahama didn't get it, not at all.

“Hikigaya-kun, I’m not sure I understand what you were trying to do… Was there any meaning in that farce of yours?” The displeased Yukinoshita stared at me.

“There is a saying that goes, ‘If there is love, love is okay!!’” I flashed a brilliant smile and gave a firm thumbs up.[1]

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[1] ‘Apron of Love’ is a cooking show loosely based on ‘Iron Chef’. Over the course of the series, female celebrities compete against each other to be the Top Apron. They are known as the ‘Apron Girls’ and their dishes are judged by male celebrities and the hosts, with the results appearing on the Ranking Board. The show’s catchphrase is “Cooking is love, and if done with love, Love is O.K.!’

“That show is so old…” Yuigahama responded in a small voice. Well, it was a show that aired when I was in elementary school… Yukinoshita, meanwhile, stood there with her head tilted in open confusion. It seemed that she didn't understand.

“You guys are trying to jump too many hurdles.” I unconsciously broke into a smile. Man, what was that sudden sense of superiority? It was as if I was the only who knew the right answer… I couldn’t stand it.

“Jeez… The point of hurdles isn't to jump over them, it’s to finish the race as quick as possible. There’s no rule that says you have to jump over them. You sh-” I unintentionally started babbling.

“I understand what you’re trying to say, so just stop talking.”

‘--ouldn’t worry about pushing, barreling or blowing down those hurdles.’ That's what I meant to say.

“You’re trying to say that our efforts so far have confused our means and our ends, correct?”

…I didn’t really get what she meant, but I was sure that she was trying to say the exact same thing as me, so I just nodded and continued.

“The point is the painstaking effort of making those handmade cookies. If you don’t stress that you made them, then there’s no point…

It won’t make someone happy if they’re exactly the same as storebought. You could even say that it’s better if they taste a little worse.”

“A little worse?” Yukinoshita's face showed her complete lack of understanding.

“If you make the recipient think, ‘Ah, I see. These aren’t exactly well-made, but they tried their best!” then they’ll mistakenly think, ‘You tried really hard for my sake…’ Even though that's kind of pitiful.”

“I’m sure it’s not that simple…”

Yuigahama looked at me suspiciously; her look basically said, ‘What the hell is this virgin going on about?’

Guess there’s no helping it… Perhaps my next step should be something a little more persuasive.

“…This is the story of a friend of a friend, but… When he had just begun 10th grade, it was the start of the semester, so it was the time to decide who would be the class representative. As you might expect, all the boys were in their teenage angst stage[2], so they were all reluctant to be chosen. So, naturally, they ended up having to choose someone at random. By some natural turn of events, my friend of a friend was chosen, and the teacher handed the reins over to him.

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[2] The original word used here is ‘chuunibyou’, which literally translates to ‘second year of junior high school sickness.’

First, he had the task of choosing a female representative. It was a lot of responsibility for a shy, reserved and timid boy.”

“All those words have the same meaning… And your introduction is too long.”

“Just shut up and listen… At that time, one girl opted to run for the position. She was a cute girl. And like that, the new male and female class presidents were inaugurated. The female representative wore a bright smile as she said, ‘I look forward to working with you for the coming year.’ Then she began to talk to my friend of a friend about various things, so he started to think, ‘Huh? Does she maybe like me? Maybe she opted to run for president once I’d be chosen. She’s talking to me a lot, so that definitely has to mean she likes me!’ It didn’t take very long for him to convince himself, probably about a week.”

“Whoa! That’s quick.” Yuigahama raised her voice in surprise as she nodded her head.

“Don’t be stupid; you can’t put a timeline on love. So, anyway, one day after school, when they were collecting a printout that the teacher requested, he mustered the courage to confess.

‘H-hey, do you have anyone you like?’

‘H-huh? No way!’

‘That answer definitely means you do! Who is it?’

‘…who do you think it is?’

‘I told you I have no idea. A hint! Give me a hint!’

‘Well, I don’t really want to…’

‘Well then just give me one of his initials. It doesn’t matter if it’s his last or first name, so please!’

‘Well… I suppose that’s okay.’

‘Really?! Score! So, what is it?’

‘…H.’

‘Huh… Does that mean… me?”

‘Huh? What are you saying? There’s no way I would! That’s so gross. Could you just stop it?’

‘Ah… Haha… Right, yeah. That was just a joke.’

‘Um… It doesn’t seem like it was… Well, we're done, so I’m going home.’

‘Y-yeah, okay.’

"So then, once I was left all alone in the classroom, I watched the sunset as tears fell down my face… And to top it off, when I went to school the next day, everyone knew about it.”

“So it was about you after all…” Yuigahama murmured, feeling awkward as she averted her gaze.

“Wait, what? Don’t be stupid. Nobody said it was about me. That was just a, you know, a figure of speech.”

Yukinoshita didn't even consider my explanation, simply sighing in annoyance. “As soon as you said it was the story of a ‘friend of a friend’, I knew. I mean, you don’t even have any friends.”

“What did you say?!”

“Putting aside your traumatic experience, what was the point of all that?”

There was no way that it would end well… That incident made girls start to hate me even more. The boys made fun of me by giving the nickname ‘Narugaya’ and Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.[3] I tried to get a grip on my feelings, then I continued talking.

“Well, what I’m trying to say is, males are helplessly simple. They get the wrong idea if you just talk to them and they’re happy just to get homemade cookies. So…” I paused to look at Yuigahama. “Those cookies aren’t really anything special… They’re a little hard to bite here and there, but to be honest, it’s fine even if they aren't that tasty.”

“Sh-shut up!” Yuigahama’s face burned red with anger. A moment later, a plastic bag and some greaseproof paper came flying my way. She may have hit me, but the fact that she chose things that wouldn’t hurt meant that she was actually pretty nice. Wait… Could that possibly mean that she likes me? Or was that just a joke? As if I could go through that experience again…

“Seriously, Hikki! You’re pissing me off. I’m leaving!” Yuigahama glared at me, grabbing her bag as she stood up to leave. She turned towards the door with a ‘hmph!’ and began to walk towards it. Her shoulders were really trembling.

Crap. Maybe I said too much… When I thought about it, I realized that letting my foul mouth run wild in class again was in bad taste. So I tried to follow it up with something better.

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[3] The ‘naru’ in ‘narugaya’ stands for narcissistic.

“Well, you know… If you give off the impression that you tried your best, won’t you touch a man’s heart?”

Yuigahama looked back over her shoulder as she stood before the door. I couldn’t see her expression with the light of sunset shining behind her.

“…Hikki, would you be touched?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I would be touched, big time! I mean, if anyone is this nice to me, I'm already ready to fall for them. And don’t call me Hikki.” I responded instantly.

“Ah… Okay.” Yuigahama gave me an indifferent response and immediately turned back toward the door. She put her hand on the door handle and was about to leave, but Yukinoshita called out to her.

“Yuigahama-san, what should we do with your request?”

“Oh, it’s okay… Don't worry about it! Next time, I’ll try my own way. Thank you, Yukinoshita-san.” Yuigahama turned to face Yukinoshita with a smile. “See you tomorrow.” She waved and left the room with that… But she was still wearing her apron.

“…I wonder if that really went okay.” Yukinoshita stared at the door and whispered to herself. “I think that people should try to reach their own limits and surpass them… That would be what's best for Yuigahama-san in the long run.”

“True, I guess. Hard work will never betray you… Though it may betray your dreams.”

“What is the difference?” The wind caressed Yukinoshita's face as she turned toward me. Her hair was swaying gently in the breeze.

“Working hard isn't enough to ensure that your dreams always come true… Un fact, it's far more common for them not to. But you can still find solace in the fact that your tried your best.”

“That’s just simple self-satisfaction.”

“Well, it isn't as if you’re really betraying yourself.”

“How self-indulgent…You disgust me.”

“Society, you included, is much too harsh to me… You should at least let me be nice to myself. In fact, I think everyone should treat themselves more gently. If everybody is hopeless, then there's no such thing as a hopeless person.”

“This is the first time I’ve encountered a pessimistic idealist… If your ideas ever catch on, then the world will fall into ruin.” Yukinoshita seemed surprised, but I happened to like my way of thinking.

Some day, NEETs will make a nation of the NEETs, by the NEETs, for the NEETs, NEEToria… Though it will probably perish in just three days or so.[4]

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[4] NEET stands for 'not in education, employment or training.'

3-8

I finally understood the purpose of the service club’s activities: in short, the club gives advice to students and helps them solve their problems. However, its existence wasn’t particularly well known. I, for one, didn’t even know it existed, and it’s not as if I’m completely ignorant of our school.

If you consider that even Yuigahama didn’t recognise this club, then someone must act as a go-between and lead people here for advice. That someone is Hiratsuka-sensei.

Sensei must sometimes send students who have problems and worries here… To this isolation ward, that is.

In my time in this sanatorium, I've just read books. After all, seeking counsel means revealing your insecurities. Talking about something like that is a high hurdle for emotionally sensitive high schoolers.

Yuigahama came here on Hiratsuka-sensei’s word; otherwise, there’s no way anybody would have come here. There were still no customers, but business was open as usual. Yukinoshita and I were both the sort who didn’t mind silence, so the times we just put our all into reading, like we were now, were peaceful.

That’s why that hard knock on the door echoed so loudly.

“Yahallo!” Yuigahama Yui slid the sliding door open with a stupid, insipid greeting. I averted my eyes from the bare legs barely covered by her short skirt, but they soon found their way to her wide-open blouse. She really was a girl with a lot of slut power.

Yukinoshita laid eyes on her, then she gave a huge sigh, murmuring to herself. “…what do you want?”

“Huh? Am I not really welcome here…? Um, Yukinoshita-san… Do you hate me?” Yuigahama’s shoulders began to tremble.

Yukinoshita sighed as though she was thinking about it. Then she replied in a mundane voice. “I don’t particularly hate you… I just think you’re a little hard to deal with.”

“When a girl says that, it means that she hates you!”

Naturally, she didn't want to be hated. She just looked like your typical slut on the outside, but her reaction was just what you'd expect from a normal girl.

“So, do you need something?”

“Well, you know how I’ve been really into cooking lately?”

“No, this is the first time I've heard that.”

“Well, this is just as, like, thanks for the other day, but I made some cookies…”

The blood quickly drained from Yukinoshita’s face. If you thought about Yuigahama’s cooking, then the first thing that came to mind was that deep black iron ore sort of thing that she had made before.

Even I got thirsty when I thought of that.

“Well, I don’t have much of an appetite right now, so I’m fine, thank you. Your gratitude is enough.” Yukinoshita had probably only lost her aptitude just now… But Yukinoshita was kind enough not to say that.

Yukinoshita had politely declined, but Yuigahama still hummed contentedly as took out a cellophane package from her bag. It was clearly a cutely-packaged bag of blackened cookies.

“Well, it’s actually fun when you try it… Maybe I’ll try making lunch or something next! So anyway, Yukinon, let’s eat lunch together.”

“No. I like eating by myself, so I don’t really want to… Also, please don’t call me ‘Yukinon.’ It makes me sick.”

“No way… Aren’t you lonely? Yukinon, where do you eat lunch?”

“Here, but… Hey, are you listening to me?”

“Ah, okay then, well… I’m free after school, so I’ll help you with club activities. Well, like, you know… I'm returning the favor? Yeah, I'm returning the favor, so don’t worry about it at all.”

“…are you listening to me?” Yukinoshita was clearly lost in Yuigahama’s constant waves of conversation. She kept looking to me, as if to say ‘Do something about her.’

As if I’m going to help you out… You always verbally abuse me, you haven’t paid me back for that Yasai Seikatsu I bought you… And she’s your friend.

Honestly, Yukinoshita had sincerely attempted to tackle Yuigahama’s problem, so that’s probably why Yuigahama was trying so hard to pay her back. Therefore, Yukinoshita had the right and responsibility to accept her gratitude.

It’d be bad to interfere, so I closed my paperback book and immediately rose from my seat. I muttered my ‘See you later’ quietly, so they wouldn’t hear, and prepared to leave the room.

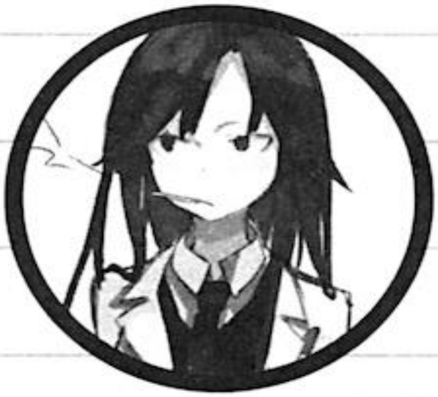
“Ah, Hikki!”

I heard my name and turned around to see a blackened thing flying towards my face. I caught it reflexively.

“I kinda need to thank you too, since you helped out as well.”

It was something deep black and heart shaped… How ominous. Still, she was trying to thank me, so I accepted.

Oh, and don’t call me Hikki.



平塚 静
shizuka hiratsuka

DATE OF BIRTH

Private
(Don't ask women what their date of birth is)

SPECIAL SKILLS

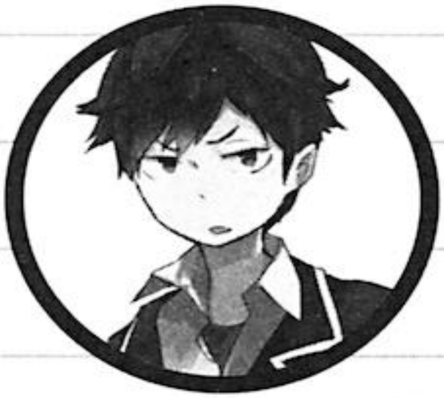
Martial Arts

HOBBIES

Going for a drive. Motorbike riding.
Reading (Manga & Harlequin Books)

HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR DAYS OFF?

I drink until the morning and sleep until noon.
If I wake up I drink again and then I go to sleep.



比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

DATE OF BIRTH

8th August
(Since my birthday's in summer,
none of my friends have ever
wished me a happy birthday.
Although, I have been cursed)

SPECIAL SKILLS

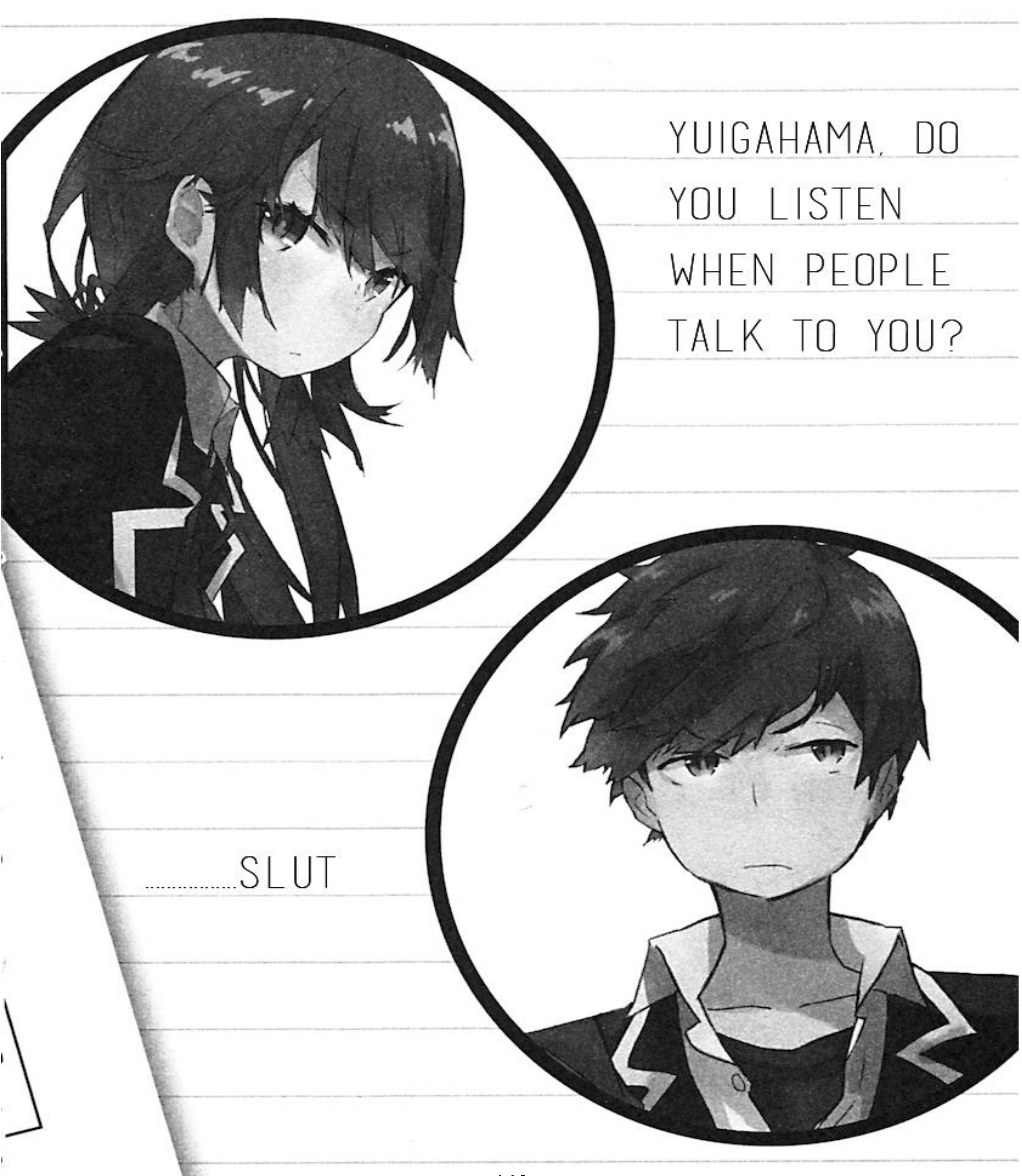
Things one can do by themselves
like quizzes and riddles.Talking to myself.

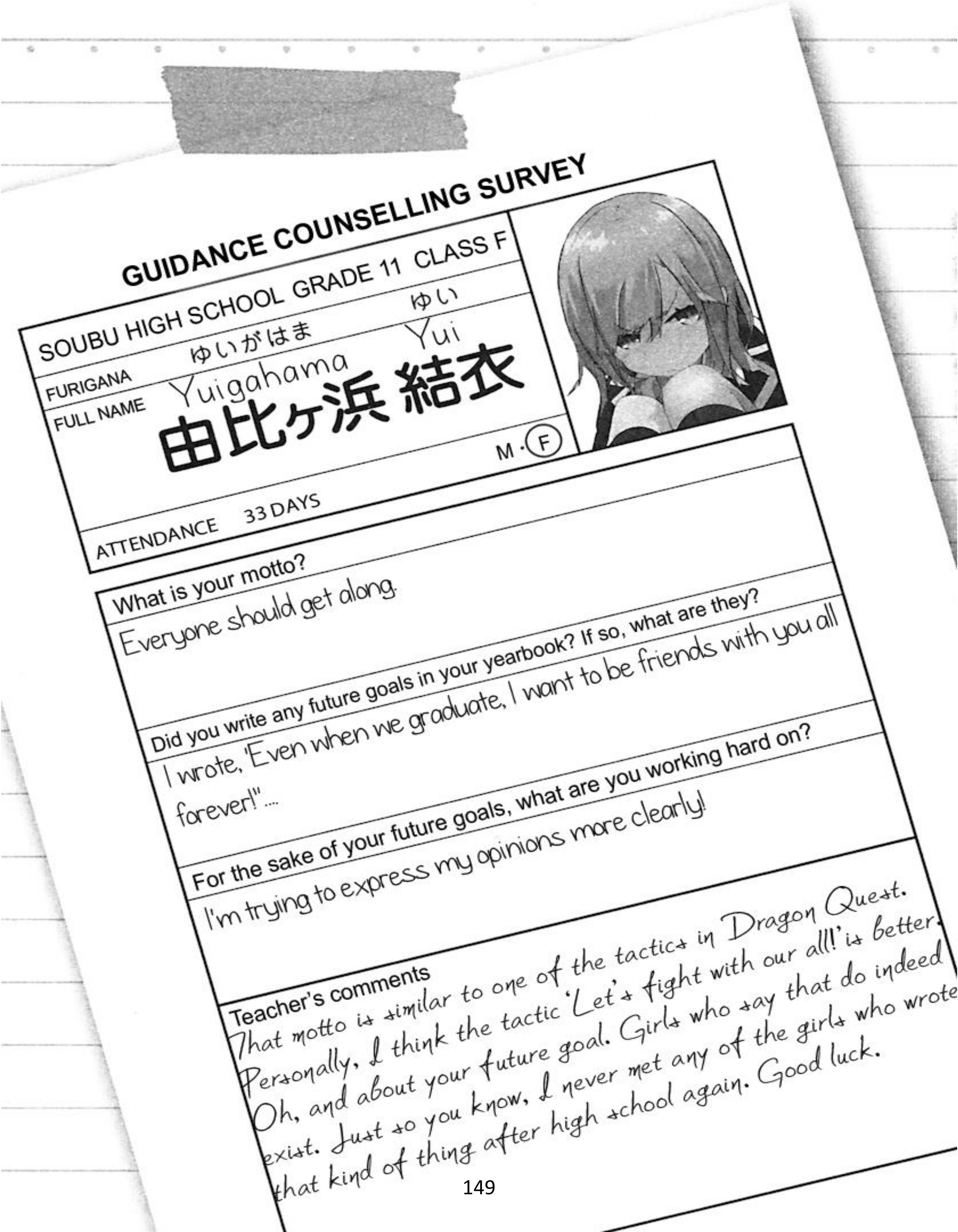
HOBBIES

Reading

HOW DO YOU SPEND YOUR DAYS OFF?

Reading, watching TV or sleeping
for hours on end.


YUIGAHAMA, DO YOU LISTEN WHEN PEOPLE TALK TO YOU?
……SLUT



GUIDANCE COUNSELLING SURVEY

SOUBU HIGH SCHOOL GRADE 11 CLASS F

FURIGANA ゆいがはま ゆい

Yuigahama Yui

FULL NAME 由比ヶ浜 結衣

M · [✓ F]

ATTENDANCE 33 DAYS

What is your motto?

Everyone should get along.

Did you write any future goals in your yearbook? If so, what are they?

I wrote, "Even when we graduate, I want to be friends with you all forever!"....

For the sake of your future goals, what are you working hard on?

I'm trying to express my opinions more clearly!

Teacher's comments

That motto is similar to one of the tactics in Dragon Quest. Personally, I think the tactic 'Let's fight with our all!' is better. Oh, and about your future goal. Girls who say that do indeed exist. Just so you know, I never met any of the girls who wrote that kind of thing after high school again. Good luck.

Chapter 4: Nevertheless, class is going well.

The ringing chime signaled the end of fourth period, sending a wave of relief through the classroom. Some people ran off to buy lunch, some noisily dug through their desks for their bento boxes, and the rest left for other classrooms.

As usual, the classroom of Grade 11's Class F was consumed by a grand lunchtime din.

It was raining, so I found myself without a place to go. I usually had a perfect spot to eat lunch, but I had no interest in getting rained on as I ate.

And so, left with no other choice, I sat in the classroom and ate my convenience store bread in silence.

I would have liked to spend this kind of rainy-day lunch break reading a novel or manga or something, but I'd left all the books I was still reading at home. Maybe I should've gone back to get them during the ten minute break…

But that train had already left the station. I guess the Japanese way to put that would be “ato no matsuri.” In English that would be “after the festival”… No, no, that would be “matsuri no ato”![1]

---

[1] He referenced a Japanese idiom, tried to translate it into English, and then corrected himself. It’s not too important to understand the idiom – he’s just screwing around a bit.

Yeah, I was so bored that I was playing both sides of a comedic dialogue by myself.

Seriously, though… I've always thought this, but when you spend a lot of time by yourself, you find that things just kind of happen.

If you're alone at home, you start talking to yourself more and more. Then you start singing loudly to yourself. And then there are a lot of times when your little sister comes home and you go, "MOTTO! MOTT- Ahh… Hi there."[2] But I still don't sing in the classroom.

And as a result, I often end up thinking about things.

In a sense, loners are masters of thinking. It's said that man is a frail animal but also a thinking animal, and before you realize it, you'll find yourself thinking about something. And because loners don't have to spare any thoughts for other people, they can think about things even more deeply. And so, loners like me possess circuitry in our brains that allow us to think differently from normal people, and this sometimes gives us the ability to come up with ideas beyond the capability of normal humans.

It's very difficult to try and express the colossal amount of information in the universe through speech alone. It's like a computer. It takes time to upload huge amounts of data to servers or to send it by e-mail. That's the only reason why loners tend to be unskilled at conversation.)

---

[2] Could be a reference to the Kannagi opening theme, but I'm not positive.

But I think that this isn't always a bad thing. Computers don't exist just for the sake of email--there's the internet and things like Photoshow[3] too. So don't think that one single point of view is enough to judge a person.

Well, I pulled out computers as an example there, but it's not like I'm that knowledgeable when it comes to computers… If you want people who know a lot about computers, then you want the people huddled together at the front of the class.

Those people were holding PSPs and doing a hunt in Ad-Hoc wireless mode. What were their names again? Oda… or Tahara… Something like that?

"Hey you, use a hammer or something!"

"Nah, a gunlance is already way more than I need ^^."

They did look like they were having fun… I do play the game they were playing, so if I'm being honest, some part of me wanted to go and join in.

A long time ago, things like manga, anime, and games were fields dominated by the loners. Lately, though, they had become another way to communicate, and joining in with people like that now required a certain level of communication ability.

---

[3] An obvious reference to Photoshop.

And unfortunately, I seem like a person who half-asses everything, so if I tried to join them they would call me a n00b or a fake when I wasn't listening. So what the hell should I have done?

When I was in middle school, I saw some people talking about anime so I tried to join in, but it was clear that they clammed up when they saw me. It was really hard on me… That was when I stopped trying to join that crowd.

And I've never been the kind of guy who tries to get people to include me, so it was even worse. When we played football or baseball as a class, the two most popular boys would do rock paper scissors to decide who would get the first pick. And I was always the last picked, you know? When I look back at my ten-year-old self, when I remember how pitifully nervous I was when they were picking teams… That almost brings me to tears, seriously.

I wasn't physically unfit, but that's why I started to become bad at sports. I liked baseball, but I couldn't find anyone to play it with me… So when I was young, I would always just play off a wall or do fielding practice by myself. I was completely used to playing baseball by myself; I'd pretend there were imaginary people in the field or at bat.

But there were also people in this class who were good at that kind of communication.

The people in the back of the class right now, for example.

There were two people from the soccer team, three boys from the basketball team, and three girls. Just one look at the lively atmosphere surrounding that group was enough to tell you that they were at the top of the class's social ladder. (By the way, Yuigahama was also part of that group.

And even within that group, there were two people shining brighter than all the others:

Hayama Hayato.

That was the name of the person at the center of that group. He was the soccer team's ace player, and was a candidate for team captain next semester. He was not a person I enjoyed staring at for extended periods of time.

In other words, he was a good-looking, faux-stylish guy. Go to hell.

“Nah, I can't do it today. I have practice.”

“Can't you just spare a day? Double scoops at Baskin Robbins are on sale today~~. I want a chocolate-cocoa double scoop.”

“Aren't those both just chocolate? (lol)”

“Ehhh? No, they're completely different! Plus, I'm really hungry right now.”

And the one raising her voice was Hayama’s partner, Miura Yumiko.

Her blonde hair was styled into ringlets, and if you saw how she wore her school uniform in a completely sloppy way down to her shoulders, you'd think she was proud of it. Was she supposed to be a prostitute or something? And her skirt was so short that there was hardly a point in her wearing it.

She had nice features and a pretty face, but her stupid behavior and gaudy clothing meant that I didn’t like her very much. Or, rather, I was really just afraid of her. You just never knew what she was going to say to you.

But (at least from what I’ve seen) Hayama wasn’t afraid of Miura, and in fact thought of her as someone fun to talk to. That's why I really didn’t understand how the kings and queens of the social ladder thought. No matter how you looked at it, that girl was obviously only a "fun person" when she was talking with Hayama. If I talked to her, then she would kill me with a single glance.

Well, that said, we didn’t really ever have a reason to talk with each other, so it was fine.

Meanwhile, Hayama and Miura were still joking around with each other.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna pass for today.”

Hayama said that; he seemed to have regrouped. Miura looked at him blankly. And then Hayama made a declaration with a super full-fledged smile across his face:

“This year we’re aiming for the Kokuritsu, after all!”

Huh? Kokuritsu, not Kunitachi? So he wasn’t talking about Kunitachi, the part of Tokyo that you could reach by the Chuuou line, but rather Kokuritsu? As in, the national tournament?

“Bwaha…”

I could feel a laugh welling up inside of me. Seeing him act all proud like that, pretending like he said something cool, was seriously just… just… I couldn’t take it anymore. It was just so awful.

“But, still, Yumiko. If you eat too much then you’re gonna regret it.”

“Ya know, I never get fat no matter how much I eat. Ahh, I guess I’ll have to go and eat lots today too. Right, Yui?”

“Ahh, yeah, Yumiko sure has really good style… But I have plans right now, so I have to--”

“I know, right? Today I’m going to have to go eat tons and tons!”

When Miura said that, laughter erupted around her. It sounded empty, like the kind you'd hear added to a comedy show. The laughs were loud and not much else; I could almost see a caption bar attached to the bottom of the screen.

I wasn't trying to listen to their conversation or anything, but they were being so loud that their voices easily reached my ears. Now that you mention it, otaku or riajuu[4] that got into a group always got really loud. I was sitting still in the center of the room with nobody around me, but everyone was being so loud… It was like I was in the eye of a hurricane.

Hayama smiled brightly. That smile made it clear that he was the center of attention, beloved by all.

“Just warning ya: don’t eat so much that your stomach explodes.”

“Like. I. Said. No matter how much I eat, I’m fine! I don’t get fat. Right, Yui?”

“Ahhh, Yumiko really just has amazing style. And her legs are so pretty. But seriously, I have to…”

“Ehh, really? But that Yukinoshita girl has crazy legs too, right?”

---

[4] A term referring to people who are doing well and satisfied with their real lives.

"Ah, that's true. Yukinon's legs are pretty crazy…"

"……"

"…Ah, but, I mean, Yumiko definitely stands out a lot more!"[5]

When Miura furrowed her brow, Yuigahama quickly tried to save herself. What the hell… It was like watching a queen and her maid. Still, it didn't seem like Yuigahama's follow-up was enough to restore her queen's mood. Miura's eyes narrowed--she did not look pleased.

"Well, actually, I think it's fine after all… If it's after practice, I can go with you."

Hayama might have sensed the tense atmosphere, because he lightly stepped in.

The queen seemed to brighten up, smiling. "Okay then, just email me when you're free!"

Yuigahama smoothed down her chest in furtive relief.

---

[5] She says "flashy" here, but that actually has a bit of a negative connotation in English, so I opted for something more positive.

Geez, that looked really painful… Were we back in the damn Middle Ages or something? If a good social life required that much effort, then I’d prefer to be alone any day, thank you very much.

And then Yuigahama and I made eye contact. She looked at me, then seemed to make up her mind about something. She took a deep breath.

“Umm, I… have to go somewhere for lunch, so…”

“Oh, really? Then make sure you buy some of that stuff when you get back--you know, that lemon tea? I totally forgot to bring something to drink today. And plus, I’m having bread, so it’s gonna be really rough if I don't have any tea, right?”

“A-Ah, b-but I might not get back until fifth period, so lunch might have ended, and, umm… y'know…”

When Yuigahama said that, Miura’s face hardened in an instant.

Miura looked like she had just gotten bitten by one of her pets. Yuigahama had probably never talked back to Miura before, and yet, on today of all days, she wasn’t doing what Miura wanted her to.

“Huh? Wait, wait, what’s going on? You know, Yui, haven’t you been staying late after school a lot nowadays? Is it just me, or are you not hanging out with us that much these days?”

“Ah, well, you know, umm, there’s just some things I’m dealing with, and, umm, it’s just some personal stuff, and I’m really very sorry, but, umm…”

Yuigahama was completely flustered, but she tried to respond. What the hell… Was she some office worker getting grilled by her boss or something?

However, Yuigahama’s response seemed to have the opposite effect. Miura began to tap her nails on her desk, seeming irritated.

Their queen's sudden explosion silenced the class. Even Oda and Tahara (or whatever their names were) really dropped the volumes on their PSPs. Hayama and the group's assorted tagalongs all dropped their gazes awkwardly to the floor.

The only sound that echoed through the room was the sound of Miura’s nails tapping on her desk.

“Well, then how should I know what’s going on? If you want to say something, then just go ahead. We’re friends, aren’t we? Hiding things from friends, you know… That’s not good, is it?”

Yuigahama quickly looked down at the floor.

At first, Miura’s words sounded just and proper. In fact, her words only seemed to reinforce the friendship between her and Yuigahama.

They were friends, companions, so they could share everything with each other--that's what Miura was saying. But her words carried another implication: “And if you can’t share with me, then we’re not friends. In fact, we're enemies.” It was the Spanish Inquisition all over again.

“I’m sorry…”

Yuigahama timidly apologized; she was still looking at the floor.

“No no no, that’s not what I want to hear. There’s something you want to say to me, isn’t there?”

There wasn’t in a person in the world who could actually say something when faced with that. Miura wasn’t trying to make conversation, and Miura wasn’t asking a question. She just wanted to make Yuigahama apologize so she could attack her.

It was so stupid… If you want to kill each other like that, at least do it in private.

I turned forward again. Then I began to eat my bread while I fiddled with my phone. I chewed for a bit and took a gulp of my drink. But for some reason… something felt stuck in my throat, and it wasn’t the bread.

…Why was that, exactly?

Meals are supposed to be times of good cheer. It's like the guy in *The Lonely Gourmet*.[6]

Don’t get me wrong: I didn’t want to help that girl in the slightest. It’s just that when a girl you know is close to tears right in front of you, it just makes your stomach churn; your appetite goes to hell. And I really just wanted to enjoy my meal…

Plus, getting attacked like that was my thing. I wouldn’t just hand my character trait over to someone else so easily.

Ah, and there was one more thing:

…I just really didn’t like that bitch.

My desk rattled as I gallantly rose from my chair.

“Hey, just-“

“Shut the hell up.”

---

[6] “Kodoku no Gourmet.” It’s a manga.

Cut it out. That's what I wanted to say, but before I had the chance, Miura sent a demonic glare my way.

“……J-just when is this rain going to stop? I-I sure wish I had brought an umbrella, hahaha…”

Jesus! Was she some kind of anaconda or something?! I really just wanted to apologize then and there!

I sank, dejected, into my chair. Miura seemed to have forgotten about my existence; she just looked down on Yuigahama's beaten-down figure.

“You know, I’m saying this for Yui’s sake, but… That wishy-washy attitude of yours really gets on my nerves.”

She started by saying it was for Yuigahama’s sake, but finished with how Miura felt about it. She contradicted herself in just one single sentence. But Miura didn’t think it was a contradiction--she was the queen of the group, and in that kind of Feudal society, the leader had absolute power.

“…Sorry.”

“That again?”

Miura's high-handed *hmph* carried a mix of anger and resignation. That sound alone made Yuigahama shrink down even more.

Just cut that crap out already, geez… Be more considerate of the people around who have to watch it happen. I can't stand this oppressive atmosphere… Stop dragging the audience into the youthful drama you people are acting out.

I once again mustered the small amount of courage I had. I mean, it's not like they could hate me more… I could head into this battle without any risk, so it wasn't too bad of a situation for me.

As soon as I stood up to face the back of the class, Yuigahama looked at me with tear-stricken eyes. And, almost as if she was waiting for that exact moment, Miura spoke in a cold voice:

"Hey, Yui, where are you looking? You know, you've just been apologizing for a while…"

-

"She's not the one you should be apologizing to, Yuigahama-san."

-

The voice that echoed through the room was even icier, even crueler, than Miura’s voice had been. Everyone who heard it cowered. That voice blew like a fierce wind from the North Pole, but that voice was also just as beautiful as an aurora.

She stood in the corner of the classroom, in front of the door, and yet she drew everyone's gaze immediately, as if she was the center of the entire world.

Of all the people on this planet, only Yukinoshita Yukino could sound like that.

I was suddenly paralyzed, and found myself completely stuck in my half-standing position. Compared to that, Miura’s last attempts at intimidation seemed like child’s play. After all, when Yukinoshita was your opponent, you didn’t even have a chance to be afraid. It was something that went so far beyond fear that you were left with only an impression of beauty.

And so everyone in the classroom became enthralled at the sight of that girl. At some point, even the sound of Miura’s nails tapping on the desk disappeared, and the classroom fell into complete silence. But Yukinoshita’s voice soon shattered that silence.

“Yuigahama-san… It really is quite something. You told me to wait for you somewhere, and yet you did not even show up at the appointed time. Wouldn’t it have been proper to at least text me that you would be late?”

When Yuigahama heard that, she smiled, seeming relieved. She began to head towards Yukinoshita.

“…S-sorry. But, umm, I don’t actually have Yukinon’s phone number…”

“…Is that so? I suppose that's true… Well then, I won’t say you’re one hundred percent responsible. I’ll let this one slide.”

Yukinoshita seemed to pay no heed to events around her, simply continuing to say whatever she wanted. It was almost refreshing to see her simply continue on at her own pace.

“W-wait just a sec! We’re still talking here!”

It seemed Miura was finally freed from her paralysis, and she flared up at Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

The Queen of Fire’s anger thundered, and her flames became hotter and hotter.

“What is it? I don’t have much time to stay and talk with you--I still haven’t eaten my lunch.”

“H-huh? You show up all of a sudden and then you say that? I’m talking with Yui here!”

“Talking with her? Weren’t you just yelling? Was that supposed to be a conversation? To me, it just seemed that you were trying to get her off-balance and then unilaterally push your own opinion on her.”

“Wha-?!?!”

“I'm sorry I didn’t realize it sooner… I admit that I’m not too aware of your type’s way of life, so I couldn’t help but compare it to an ape's dominance games."

Even the Queen of Fire was freezing over when faced with the Queen of Ice.

“Oooo…”

Miura glared at Yukinoshita, her anger completely obvious. However, Yukinoshita let her glare pass with indifference.

“You can huff and puff all you like, and you can act like you’re the king of the castle, but please do that privately and on your own time. Otherwise, your little act will fall apart, just like your makeup is right now.”

“…Huh, what are you saying? I don't get it.”

Miura, sounding like a bit of a sore loser, finally seemed to collapse back down into her chair. Her curly locks of hair swayed from side to side as she began to furiously fiddle with her cell phone.

After all that, not a single person tried to talk to that girl. Even Hayama, who was usually good at keeping up with situations like this, could only yawn to try and diffuse the awkwardness.

And right next to all that was Yuigahama, still standing stock still. She was gripping her skirt hem tightly, as if she wanted to say something. Yukinoshita may have guessed what Yuigahama wanted to do, because she began to walk out of the room.

“I’m going on ahead.”

“I-I’m coming too…”

“…Do as you please.”

“Okay.”

When Yuigahama heard that, she let out a smile, but… She was the only one smiling.

Hey, hey, what the hell was up with this atmosphere… The situation was insanely uncomfortable, so it was really hard to stay in the classroom. Before I knew it, more than half my classmates had begun to leave the room, saying that they were thirsty or that they needed to use the restrooms. The only ones left there, other than Hayama and Miura’s group, were the more overly-curious members of the class.

I supposed that I also had to take a chance and ride that big wave right out the door! But, seriously… If the atmosphere got any darker in there, then I would suffocate and die.

I began to walk, as quietly as possible, toward the door, passing by Yuigahama on the way. And at that point, I heard a small whisper:

“Thanks for standing up back there.”

4-2

When I left the classroom, I saw Yukinoshita there. She was leaning against the wall right next to the door with crossed arms and closed eyes. She was giving off an extremely cold aura, and that might be why no one else was around. It was very quiet.

And that's why I could hear the conversation happening inside the classroom:

"… Umm, I'm sorry. You know, I get a bit uneasy when I can't get along with someone… Or you could say I just get really self-conscious all of a sudden… so maybe you're annoyed by that."

"………"

"Uhhh, well, how should I put it? I've always been like that. Even when I played Ojamajo-pretend with my friends, I wanted to be Doremi or Onpu-chan, but another girl wanted to be those, so I ended up being Hazuki…[1] I grew up in a big apartment complex with other people around me all the time, so maybe that's why I thought that was the best way to act…"

"I have no idea what you're trying to say."

---

[1] A reference to Ojamajo Doremi characters. Hey, did you know our group also does the translation for this series? You can check it out here!

“Y-Yeah, I guess so, haha. Well, I don’t really know what I’m saying either… It’s just, umm, when I saw Hikki and Yukinon I realized something. Even when there's nobody around you, you still look like you’re having fun… You two say what you're thinking, and even though you don’t usually get along, you seem to mesh somehow…”

Every once in a while, I could hear something like sobs from inside the classroom. Every time that happened, I could see Yukinoshita’s shoulders twitch. She widened her eyes just a little and tried to look inside the classroom without turning her head. You idiot, you won’t be able to see anything from there. If you’re that worried, then go in the damn room. That girl… She's really not honest with herself.

“After I saw that, I started to think that maybe it was wrong for me to always desperately try to get along with everyone… I mean, to be honest, Hikki is seriously a Hikki. During breaks he’s just off by himself reading books and giggling… It’s gross, but he looks like he’s having fun.”

Gross, she says… Once Yukinoshita heard that, she let out a chuckle.

“I thought that you only had that weird habit in the clubroom, but it looks like you do that in the classroom too. That’s seriously a disgusting habit--you should just cut it out.”

“If you knew about that already, then you should have told me…”

“But it's only natural that I didn’t. Who would want to talk to you after you do something that disgusting?”

I'll seriously attempt to be more careful from now on, then. I’m not going to read any more light novels about evil gods at school.[2]

”So I thought, maybe I shouldn’t try so hard, I'll just take it a bit more easy… Or something like that. But it’s not like I hate Yumiko or something. We can still get along… a lot… after this, right?”

”…Hmph. I see. Well then, whatever. That’s fine.”

I heard the sound of Miura snapping her phone closed.

”…Sorry again. Thanks.”

And with that, the conversation in the room stopped, and I heard the pitter patter of Yuigahama’s shoes walking towards us. Taking that sound as a signal, Yukinoshita also stopped leaning on the wall and stood up.

“… Well, what do you know. She can stand up for herself.”

---

[2] I’m not super sure, but this might be a reference to Yamunaku Kakusei! Jashin Oonuma, which is also a light novel published by the same publishing house. (Jashin means evil God).

For that brief moment, I was taken aback by the brief glimpse of a smile on Yukinoshita's face.

It was a smile, simple, pure, devoid of mockery or sarcasm or sorrow.

However, that smile soon vanished, and Yukinoshita's expression returned to its usual, icy state. While I was staring at Yukinoshita's smile, she quickly walked off to the other end of the hallway and disappeared, paying me no attention whatsoever. She was probably heading towards the meeting place she and Yuigahama had agreed on.

…Well then, what should I do next? I began to walk off, but at that moment, the classroom door opened.

"Eh? W-why is Hikki standing right here?"

I was frozen stiff, but I managed to lift up my right arm and greet her, hoping I could get out of this situation. As I looked at Yuigahama's face, I could see she was getting redder and redder.

"Were you listening?"

"W-whatever could you mean…?"

“You were listening weren’t you? You were eavesdropping?! Gross! Stalker! Weirdo! Um umm… so gross! I can’t believe you! You’re seriously gross. You’re seriously, truly gross.”

“Just hold on! Show some restraint!”

I mean, even I'll get sad if you throw so much abuse right in my face. And don’t say that last part with a completely serious expression, dammit… I think I’m really wounded now.

“Hmph, it’s a bit too late for me to show restraint. And whose fault do you think that is? Idiot.”

Yuigahama stuck out her sakura-colored tongue out at me, and with that cute attempt to provoke me, she ran off. Was she an elementary schooler or something? Don’t run in the halls, dammit.

“Whose fault… It was Yukinoshita’s fault, right?”

I was talking to myself. I was alone, so that was only natural.

When I looked at the clock, I saw that there was only a little time left in our break. That awfully thirst-inducing lunch break was also already over. Maybe I should go buy some Sportop to quench the thirst in my throat and in my heart.

As I headed for the vending machine, I suddenly realized something:

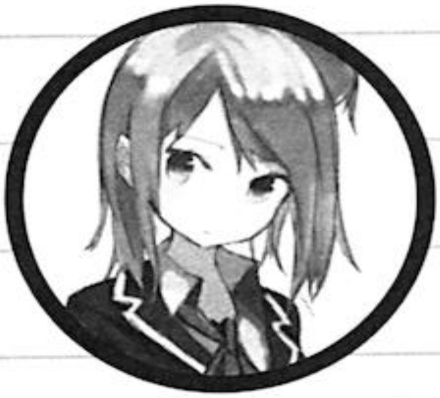
Otaku had otaku communities, so they weren’t alone.

And becoming a riajuu meant that you had to pay a lot of attention to the pecking order and balance of power, so it was really tough.

So in the end, I was the only person who was alone. I didn’t need Hiratsuka-sensei to isolate me, because I was already isolated in my class… So there really wasn’t a point in trying to isolate me further in the service club.

…What a sad conclusion that was. Reality was way too cruel.

The only sweet thing in my life was the taste of this Sportop.



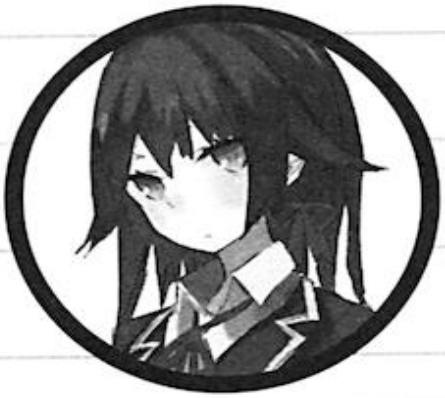
由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama

Birthday:
- June 18

Special Skills:
- Email, karaoke, getting along with people

Hobbies:
- Karaoke
- Cooking (I'll try harder from now on!)

How do you spend your days off?
- Shopping with friends
- Karaoke with friends
- Purikura* with friends
- Chilling out with friends



雪ノ下雪乃
yukino yukinoshita

Birthday:
- January 3

(That's during winter break so I've never celebrated it with classmates)

Special Skills:
- Cooking laundry cleaning housework etc.
- Aikido**

Hobbies:
- Reading (General literature, Western literature, classics)
- Horse riding

How do you spend your days off?
- Reading, watching films

---

*Those small photo booths where you take small commemorative photos with friends

**A style of Japanese martial arts

5: To sum up, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru is a bit off.

It might be a little too late to describe how the service club worked, but we were supposed to listen to the problems of students and then try to help them out.

If I didn’t remind myself every now and then, I really would forget what this club was for. Most of the time, Yukinoshita and I just sat and read books. And Yuigahama just played around with her phone.

“Hm… Ah, why exactly are you here again?”

She blended in so well that we never questioned her presence, but that didn’t mean Yuigahama was a member of the service club. Actually, I wasn’t even sure if I was a member of this club. Was I, really? Either way, I kinda wanted to quit…

“Huh? Ah, I mean, I just had a lot of free time today, y'know?”

“’Y'know’? Even if you say that, I still don't know. Also, what the hell--you from Hiroshima or something?”[1]

“Huh? Hiroshima? I’m from Chiba.”

---

[1] What now follows is a page of discussion on Japanese dialects. Please take pity on your poor translator who will do his best to get through this section in English without making things sound incoherent.

Well, in reality, people who spoke the Hiroshima dialect added “y'know” to the end of things, but a lot of people seemed surprised when I told them that. I had a pretty horrible image in my mind of how guys from Hiroshima sounded, but girls who spoke with an authentic Hiroshima accent were really cute. In fact, that accent would rank amongst my top ten for cutest accents.

“Hmph. You were born in Chiba, but don't go thinking that makes it okay for you to say you’re ‘from Chiba.’”

“Hey, Hikigaya-kun. I really have no idea what you’re trying to say right now…”

Yukinoshita gave me an incredibly scornful look. I ignored her.

“Let’s go then, Yuigahama. First question: what do you call it when you get hit so hard that you have internal bleeding?”

“A black-and-blue!”[2]

“Hm… That’s the correct answer. To think you also understand the Chiba dialect… All right then, on to question two. If you could pick a side dish to go with your lunch, what would it be?”

---

[2] Yeah they didn’t say this at all. They actually talk about different ways of saying the word “bruise” in Japanese dialects. But because there is no common variation on the word “bruise” in English dialects, I chose to just change the text around and go with something that does have common dialectical differences in English.

“Miso peanuts!”

“Hmmm… Maybe you really are from Chiba…”

“That’s what I’ve been saying, y'know?”

Yuigahama put her arms on her hips and tilted her head to the side, as if to say, “What in the world is this guy on about?” Yukinoshita was next to her with her elbow resting on the table and her hand on her forehead. She let out a sigh.

“…Hey, what was that all of a sudden? Was there a point to that exchange?”

Of course there was no point.

“It was just the Trans-Chiba Prefecture Ultra Quiz.[3] To be more concrete, by ‘Trans’ I mean going from Matsudo to Choushi.”[4]

“That doesn’t cover a lot at all!”

“Fine, fine, then we can make it from Sawara to Tateyama.”

---

[3] A parody of the Trans-America Ultra Quiz, a Japanese game show.

[4] If you plotted this on a map, this basically crosses the very top of Chiba Prefecture, and misses the bottom 80 percent of the prefecture.

“So you’re going from top to bottom…”

…You two, how do you get all that from just the city names? Do you really like Chiba that much?

“Well then, third question: if you ride on the Sotobou Line towards Toke, then what do you call the strange animal that (for whatever reason) suddenly appears?”

“Ah, speaking of Matsudo, Yukinon, I hear that there are a lot of ramen shops over there. Let’s go sometime.”

“Ramen… I haven’t had ramen too often, so I don’t really know--”

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I haven’t had ramen much either!”

“…Eh? How does that make it fine? Could you please explain that a bit more?”

“Hmm, and also, what was it about Matsudo…? Right, there was this shop named Nantoka that they say is really good…”

“Are you listening to what I’m saying?”

“Hm? Yeah, I am. Ah, but there are good shops around here too… This is all near my house, so I’m super knowledgeable about this area. My house is like five minutes away from here, you see. And there’s this shop here that I pass by all the time when I’m walking my dog.”

……The correct answer was ‘ostrich.’ If you’re riding on a train and you suddenly see an ostrich outside your window, I guess that you wouldn't really be surprised, you’d just be pretty impressed.

Sigh.

I left the two girls to their (rather mismatched) conversation about ramen and went back to my book.

There were three people here and I was still alone. What the hell was that about?

But, well, I guess spending time like this did make me feel like a normal high school student. Compared to middle schoolers, high schoolers had more freedoms, so they tended to be interested in trends and food. So this ramen conversation did feel like a very high school conversation.

…Though, granted, most high schoolers don't do things like the Trans-Chiba Prefecture Ultra Quiz.

5-2

It was the next day. When I headed for the club room, I was surprised to see Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both standing in front of the door. I wondered what in the world they were doing until I saw that, for some reason, the door was ajar and they were peeking inside.

“What are you two doing?”

“Hyahh!”

I heard that cute scream, and at the same time the two girls jumped in shock.

“Hikigaya-kun… You surprised me…”

“I’m the one who’s surprised here…”

What kind of reaction was that? It reminded me of what happens if I come across my family’s pet cat in the living room during the middle of the night.

“Could you not suddenly call out to us like that?”

Yukinoshita's irritated glare also perfectly resembled our cat. Now that I think about it, that cat is pretty friendly with everyone else in my family… That's one more way that Yukinoshita really reminded me of that animal.

“Well, sorry. So, what are you doing?”

Yuigahama had once again slightly opened the clubroom door and was quietly peeking in. When I spoke up, she was the one who answered me.

“There’s a suspicious person in the clubroom.”

“You two are the suspicious ones here…”

“Quiet--that's enough. Would you be so kind as to go in and see who this person is?”

Yukinoshita ordered me with a testy look on her face.

I did as I was told, stepping in front of the two girls and carefully opening the door. I entered the room.

Inside, waiting for us, was the wind.

As soon as I opened the door, we were met by a breeze. It was a breeze typical of this near-the-sea school, and as it whirled around the clubroom, it sent papers flying.

The spectacle reminded me of those magic tricks where many white doves flew out of a magician’s silk hat. And there, in the center of that world of white, stood one person.

“Ku ku ku, to think we would meet at a place like this… What a surprise. I’ve been waiting for you, Hikigaya Hachiman.”

“W-what did you say?!”

He'd waited for me, and he was surprised…? What the hell was with that? If anyone should be surprised, it was me.

I pushed my way through the whirling white papers to get a good look at my opponent.

And so, standing there, I saw… Ugh, no, never mind, never mind. I didn't want anything to do with Zaimokuza Yoshiteru.

Well, granted, I don’t have much to do with most people in this school… But even amongst all those people, this guy was the person I least wanted to see.

I mean, look at him--he was sweating like it was summer, thanks to his damn coat and those fingerless gloves.

Even if I knew him, I was going to pretend I didn’t.

“Hikigaya-kun, that one over there seems to know you…”

Yukinoshita, who was hiding behind me, looked suspiciously back and forth between me and “that thing over there.” Zaimokuza seemed to cower for a moment under her ill-mannered stare, but he soon returned his gaze to me. Then he crossed his arms and began to laugh once again in his low voice.

He used exaggerated motions, shrugging his shoulders and slowly shaking his head.

“To think that you would forget your old partner… How low of you, Hachiman.”

“He’s calling you his old partner…”

Yuigahama gave me a cold look, the kind of look that said, “Go die, you pieces of garbage.”

“Indeed, old partner. You still remember, do you not? How we braved those hellish times together…”

“They paired us up in gym class. That was it…”

I couldn’t bear to just go along with it any longer, and Zaimokuza grimaced.

“Hmph. Customs so evil as that may only be called hell. Pair up with whomever you like, they say? Ku ku ku, as if I desire friendship with this ephemeral body of mine! …As if I ever wish to experience a parting that will tear that body apart! If that is love, then I have no need for love!”

He stared off into the distance out the window. Surely there was some lovely princess’s image floating up there, in that empty sky… Or maybe everyone liked Fist of the North Star way too damn much.

Well, now that we’d come this far, you can probably tell how sharp this guy was. You could probably tell that he was one of *those* people.

“What do you want, Zaimokuza?”

“Hng, so you speak the name engraved in my soul… Indeed, it is I, the master fencer general, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru.”

He flashily fluttered his coat, and as he looked back in our direction, he put a gallant expression on his chubby face. It seemed he had fallen completely into acting out the master fencer general character he had created.

Just looking at him made a throbbing pain run through my head…

But maybe I should say that the throbbing pain was in my heart. More importantly, the stares of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama hurt even more than that.

“Hey… What exactly is that supposed to be?”

Yuigahama looked clearly irritated… Should I say unhappy? …and she was glaring at me. But, seriously, why in the world are you glaring at *me*?

“This guy is Zaimokuza Yoshiteru… We used to be gym partners.”

Honestly, that's all it was. My relationship with Zaimokuza extended no further than that… Though it’s not completely wrong to say that we were, in some sense, partners who had banded together to push through hellish times.

It truly is hell to pair up with friends.

Zaimokuza went through that same pain, and so he also understood how terrible those times were.

Ever since the first gym class, where Zaimokuza and I were paired up because we had been the only ones left over, we were always put together. To be honest, I really wanted to trade that huge chuunibyou[1] oaf off to some other team, but I couldn't manage it, so I gave up. I also considered declaring myself a free agent, but unfortunately, someone of my level is just too expensive to hire, so that didn't work out either… Okay, fine, fine, I lied--Zaimokuza and I were just the only ones who didn't have friends.

As Yukinoshita listened to my explanation, she looked back and forth between me and Zaimokuza. That seemed to satisfy her, and she nodded.

"Birds of a feather flock together, don't they?"

Naturally, she came to the absolute worst conclusion possible.

"You idiot, don't lump me together with him… I'm not that much of a lost cause yet. First of all, we're not even friends, dammit."

"Hmph, I would have to agree. Indeed, I do not have any friends… I'm seriously alone, *sniff*."

Zaimokuza spoke in a sad, self-derisive tone. Hey, look, he's back to normal again…

---

[1] Chuunibyou refers to (relatively) mature people who are overly absorbed in fantasy worlds, often pretending they are some fictional character that only exists in their heads.

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Your friend there seems to want something from you, doesn’t he?”

Yukinoshita's words almost made me want to cry. The word “friend” hadn’t made me so sad since middle school…

It hadn’t made me that sad since the time I heard it from Kaori-chan in middle school… *“I like Hikigaya-kun and you’re really nice, but going out with you is a bit… Can’t we just be friends?”* I really don’t need friends like that…

“Mwahaha, I've wiped that from my memory. By the way, Hachiman. This is the service club, is it not?”

Zaimokuza had gotten back into character, laughing strangely and looking at me.

What the hell was that laugh supposed to be? That’s the first time I’ve heard something like that.

“Yeah, this is the service club.”

Yukinoshita answered in my place. When she did that, Zaimokuza looked over at Yukinoshita for a brief second before immediately returning his gaze to me. Why the hell did he have to look at *me*?

“…I-is that so? Therefore, if Hiratsuka-sensei spoke true, Hachiman, you have a duty to grant my wishes, do you not? To think that after so many hundreds of years you would once again return to my service… This must be the work of the Hachiman Great Bodhisattva.[2] ”

“It’s not like the service club is here to grant your wishes… We just help you out a bit.”

“…H-hm. Then, Hachiman, lend me your hand. Fu fu fu, now that I think about it… We are equals, are we not? Equals who, just as in times of old, will seek to conquer all that lies under heaven!”

“Whatever happened to that whole ‘servant’ angle? Also, why the hell are you only looking at *me*?”

“Ah-ahem! Such trifling matters do not concern people such as us! I will make a special exception in this case.”

Zaimokuza coughed in a completely ridiculous way, perhaps to try and cover up his fumble. And then, of course, he looked right back at me.

---

[2] The Hachiman Great Bodhisattva is a deity of archery and war in Japanese mythology. And yes, also happens to be the name of the main character in this novel.

“I apologize. It simply seems that the hearts of man have fallen from the ways of the days of yore. Oh, how I miss the pure times of the Muromachi Era[3] … Do you not feel the same, Hachiman?”

“Absolutely not. And seriously, go die.”

“Ku ku ku. As if death can scare me… It would just grant me a whole new world to conquer!”

Zaimokuza lifted his arms high, his coat fluttering in the breeze.

He really had a huge tolerance for people telling him to die…

I was the same… I guess that when you got used to insults and abuse being flung your way, you got good at retorting or dealing with it. It was a very sad skill to have… It really brought me to tears.

“Uwahh…”

Yuigahama seemed seriously repulsed. Her face even seemed a bit pale to me.

“Hikigaya-kun, could I speak with you for just a moment…?”

---

[3] The period between around 1400 to 1600 in Japanese history. Overlaps quite heavily with the Warring States Era.

After saying that, Yukinoshita pulled on my sleeve and whispered in my ear.

"What is going on? What is up with this master fencer general whatever?"

Yukinoshita's cute face was very close to mine and she was giving off a pleasant scent, but her voice didn't have a single ounce of seductiveness in it.

Faced with that, I felt it was more than enough to answer with a single sentence:

"That is chuunibyou. Just chuunibyou."

"Choo-nee-byou?"

Yukinoshita looked at me, tilting her head to the side. I just noticed it, but when girls say the syllable "choo,"[4] their lips are really cute… What a strange discovery.

Yuigahama, who also trying to listen in to our conversation, joined in.

"That some kind of disease?"

"It's not like it's a real disease… Just think of it as a slang term."

---

[4] In Japanese, "chuu" (pronounced like "choo") means kiss.

In short, chuunibyou referred to a sequence of really embarrassingly painful behaviors often seen in middle schoolers.

And even amongst those people, Zaimokuza was a particularly bad case, deserving of the title of “jakigan.”[5]

These were people who yearned for the abilities and strange powers they saw in manga, anime, and games, and behaved as if they had those abilities. Of course, if they had those abilities, then they also had to make up stories to make such powers plausible, so they often pretended to be the reincarnation of some warrior of legend, or some human chosen by the gods, or some secret agent. And then they acted in accordance with that backstory.

Why did they do things like that?

Because it was cool.

Well, granted, I think that anyone who’s been through middle school has thought that way at least once. I think that everyone, at some point, has stood in front of the mirror and said something like, “Good evening to everyone tuning into Countdown TV.[6] Umm, this time we have a new song about true love, and I’ve written the lyrics…”

In essence, chuunibyou was the most extreme example of that.

---

[5] “Jakigan,” literally “evil eye,” is another word that can be applied to chuunibyou. It is a derogatory reference to the “third eyes” that characters have which grant them special powers in many action series aimed at younger audiences.

[6] Countdown TV is a Japanese late night music TV show.

And so I briefly explained what chuunibyou was, and Yukinoshita seemed satisfied with that. I think this every single time, but I always truly admire how quickly this girl's mind can turn--it's almost as if I can say just one thing and she's already ten steps ahead of me. She never even needs that much explanation to understand the heart of a situation.

"I have no idea what's going on…"

In stark contrast to Yukinoshita, Yuigahama didn't seem very happy; she was muttering blankly. To be fair, I don't think that I would understand either if I had only heard my explanation… Honestly, understanding that quickly made Yukinoshita the strange one.

"Hm, so it's like using some backstory you dreamed up and putting on a play based on that, right?"

"That's pretty much it. In his case, he seems to have used Ashikaga Yoshiteru, the thirteenth-generation shogun of the Muromachi Bakufu, as his basis. It was probably easier that way, since they share a given name."

"So why does he consider you his companion?"

“He probably took Hachiman and turned it into the Hachiman Great Bodhisattva, didn’t he? The Seiwa Genji[7] worshipped him fervently as a god of war. You’ve heard of the Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine, right?[8]”

After I responded, Yukinoshita suddenly fell into silence. What was wrong? I gave her a questioning look, and I saw that she was staring at me with wide eyes.

“I’m surprised. You’re quite informed.”

“…Yeah, I guess.”

Unpleasant memories were about to resurface, so I suddenly turned my head away. Then I took the chance to change the subject.

“Zaimokuza's way of bringing up every little piece of historical trivia gets really annoying, but at least he’s basing his character on real history.”

Hearing that, Yukinoshita glanced briefly at Zaikomokuza and questioned me with a genuine look of displeasure on her face.

“…You’re saying there are ones worse than *that*?”

---

[7] A famous line of rulers of the Minamoto clan, one of whom is Tokugawa Ieyasu, the shogun who united Japan after the Warring States era and kicked off what is considered to be early modern Japan. Ashikaga Yoshiteru is also (probably?) considered to be part of this line.

[8] Most famous shrine in the city of Kamakura, and of course one meant to worship the deity Hachiman.

“Yes.”

“So, just for my personal reference, what kinds of people are those?”

“In the beginning, there were seven gods in this world. There are the three gods of creation, the Wise Emperor Garin, the Warrior Goddess Mythica, and Heartia, the Protector of Souls. There are the three gods of destruction, the King of Fools Ortho, the Lost Temple Rogue, and the Deity of False Suspicions Lailai. And then there is also the Eternally Absent God with No Name. From the beginning of time, those seven gods have repeatedly brought prosperity and then destruction to the world. Presently, the world has already lived through that cycle six times, and this time the Japanese government is trying to prevent the world’s destruction by finding the reincarnated bodies of those gods. Among those seven gods, the most important is the Eternally Absent God with No Name, whose powers are still not fully understood, and I, Hikig-… whoa, you’re really good at leading questions, aren’t you?! Hahaha, I’m seriously shaking, you almost got me to spill all the beans there!”

“But I wasn’t trying to lead you in any way…”

“Disgusting…”

“Yuigahama, be careful what you say. You might find yourself accidentally committing suicide one day.”

Yukinoshita let out an exasperated sigh, and then looked back and forth again between me and Zaimokuza before speaking again.

“In other words, Hikigaya-kun is in the same class as that one over there. That’s why he’s so informed when it comes to this master fencer general or whatever it is.”

“No no no, what are you saying, Yukinoshita-san? Of course that isn’t true, Yukinoshita-san. Of course there’s a reason I’m so informed… It’s because I chose to take Japanese history, you know? It’s because I played Nobunaga’s Ambition[9], you know?”

“Right…”

Yukinoshita gave me a doubtful look. It seemed that I was guilty until proven innocent.

But I didn’t back off. I wasn’t the same as Zaimokuza, so I could look Yukinoshita straight back in her eyes with confidence. Because what she said was not exactly true:

Indeed, I wasn’t the same as Zaimokuza… *any longer*.

---

[9] Turn based strategy game which has groundings in Japanese history.

The name “Hachiman” is fairly uncommon, so there was a time during my childhood when I wondered whether I was some kind of special existence. I also liked anime and manga back then, so it was pretty natural to fall into that kind of delusion.

As I lay in my futon, I would pretend that there was some amazing power lying hidden within me, and that, someday, those powers would suddenly awaken. When that day came, I would be pitched into a battle for the fate of the world. In preparation for that day, I even kept a spirit world diary, and I would write a report to send to the government every three months. Everyone did that kind of stuff though, right? …They don’t…?

“… Well, how should I put it…? In the past we were probably the same, but we're different now.”

“Hm, I wonder…”

Yukinoshita gave me a teasing smile and walked away from me, heading for Zaimokuza.

As I watched her retreating back, a thought suddenly struck me:

Was I really different now from Zaimokuza?

The answer was yes.

I didn't have idiotic daydreams any longer, and I didn't write spirit world diaries or government reports either. The only thing I'd written recently was a "List of People I Will Never Forgive." Naturally, the first person on that list was Yukinosihta.

I didn't play around with Gundam figures while making sound effects with my own mouth any more, and I didn't screw around with clothespins trying to make the strongest robot[10]. I also outgrew using rubber bands and aluminum foil to make self-defense weapons. And I've also stopped trying to cosplay with my dad's coat and my mom's fake fur.

I was different from Zaimokuza.

By the time I'd managed to get over my indecisiveness and reach that conclusion, Yukinoshita was already standing right in front of Zaimokuza. Yuigahama was loudly whispering, "Yukinon, run away!" Ugh, poor guy…

"I think I understand. You're here so we can help you cure this sickness, am I correct?"

"…Hachiman. I have joined you here to see if you will abide by your oath to grant our wishes. It is but a single, sublime desire."

---

[10] I seriously didn't know this was a thing, but apparently it is.

Zaimokuza averted his gaze from Yukinoshita and looked at me. He'd definitely switched between first person and the royal “we” just then… How confused was this person?

Then I realized something. That guy… Every time Yukinoshita spoke to him, he definitely turned toward me instead.

Well, it’s not like I didn’t sympathize… Before I learned what kind of person Yukinoshita really was, I also got flustered every time she talked to me. Back then, I couldn’t even properly look her in the eye.

But Yukinoshita did not have a normal person's sensitivity, and was not the type who would accommodate those types of manly anxieties.

“I’m the one talking here. When someone speaks to you, you should try and face that person directly.”

Yukinoshita spoke in a cold voice as she grabbed Zaimokuza by the collar, forcing him to face her straight on.

Indeed. Yukinoshita herself had no manners, but she was really annoying when it came to the manners of others. It had gotten to the point where even I made sure I properly greeted her every time I went to the clubroom.

When Yukinoshita released Zaimokuza’s collar, he began to cough severely. It really wasn't a good time for him to try and stay in character.

“… M-Mwahahaha… By Jove…”

“Additionally, stop talking like that.”

“……”

Yukinoshita struck him down, and so the silenced Zaimokuza looked down at the ground.

“Why are you wearing a coat in this season?”

“… H-hmph. This cloak, as one of my twelve divine instruments, protects me from the demonic energies of this world. But each time I reincarnate into this world, it is this cloak that allows me to choose the most appropriate form to take. Fuwahahaha!”

“Stop talking like that.”

“Ah, okay…”

“So, why are you wearing fingerless gloves? Is there a point to that? Those won’t protect your fingers.”

“…Ah, yes. Umm… These are an inheritance of my previous incarnation, and together, they are one of my twelve divine instruments. This special armor shoots out diamonds, and so I may more easily wield their power in combat, I let my fingers out into the open… Indeed! Fuwahahaha!”

“You're talking like that again.”

“Hahaha! Hahaha… hah…”

Zaimokuza started with a boisterous laugh, but it soon devolved into a slightly tearful sigh. And then he once again fell into silence.

Perhaps she took pity on him at that point, but… Yukinoshita suddenly changed course, putting on a kind-looking expression.

“In any case, is it fine if we simply say that you want this disease cured?”

“…Ah, it’s not really a disease though…”

Zaimokuza, who still wasn’t looking Yukinoshita in the eye, spoke in a very small voice. He just glanced at me every now and then with a troubled expression on his face.

He had completely returned to his true self.

It seemed that Zaimokuza was incapable of staying in character while subject to Yukinoshita’s sparkling gaze.

Ugh! I couldn't watch it any longer! Zaimokuza was way too pitiful. It made me want to throw him some sort of lifeline.

I decided that the best first step would be to separate Zaimokuza and Yukinoshita, and therefore I took a step towards them… But I felt myself step on something.

It was one of the papers that had been flown through the room earlier.

When I picked it up, I saw a bunch of insanely difficult kanji lined up. That piece of paper completely stole my focus.

“This is…”

I raised my gaze from the page and looked into the middle of the room. These pages, typeset with forty-two words on each of the thirty-four lines, were scattered all throughout the room. I picked them up one by one and began to arrange them in sequential order.

“Hm, as expected… I didn’t have to say a word for you to realize it. Truly this is proof that there was value in our struggles against those hellish times.”

Zaimokuza spoke with quite a lot of emotion in his voice, but I ignored him. Yuigahama looked at the papers I held in my hands.

“What’s that?”

I passed her the bundle of papers and she began to flip through them, checking their contents. I could almost see a question mark floating above her head as she tried to read the pages, but she finally gave out a long sigh and passed the papers back to me.

“What’s this?”

“A draft of a novel… I think.”

In response, Zaimokuza cleared his throat as if trying to reset the conversation.

“I am grateful for your keen insight. Indeed, that is a manuscript for a light novel. I intend to apply to a certain novel competition for new authors, but I have no friends, and so I have no second opinions. Read that, if you would.”

“For some reason, I get the feeling that there was something really sad in the middle of that…”

You could say that the desire to be a light novel author was a natural symptom of chuunibyou. It was natural that they'd want to bring their imagination to life. And it wasn’t strange for those overimaginative chuunibyou to believe that they would make good novelists. And of course it was a happy thing to be able to earn a living with something you loved.

So if Zaimokuza wanted to be a light novel author, then that was normal.

Coming all this way to show his work to us, on the other hand, was not normal.

“There are sites where you can put this kind of stuff up and ask for feedback, so why don’t you just try one of those?”

“No use--those people have no mercy. Too much criticism. I would probably die.”

…What a weakling.

But certainly, on the internet others show no. restraint at all. They'll say what they want, whereas your friends would be more considerate of your feelings and try to say stuff to make you feel better about yourself.

Generally speaking, considering our relationship with Zaimokuza, we couldn't be too strict with him. It's definitely difficult to dole out a harsh critique when you're looking at the other person in the eye. We would probably have to go at it in a really roundabout way instead. Normally, anyway…

“But then…”

I glanced to my side and let out half a sigh. I met Yukinoshita’s gaze; she had a blank look on her face.

“Yukinoshita is probably going to be harsher than the people online, you know?”

5-3

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I each took a copy of Zaimokuza's manuscript with us. We'd decided we would spend a night reading it.

If I were to slap a label onto Zaimokuza’s light novel, I would call it a superhuman action novel set in a school.

It took place in a certain small city in Japan, a place where, under the cover of darkness, there were constant battles between secret organizations and super-powered reincarnators. In the midst of that, a completely ordinary young man awakened to his hidden powers and began to spectacularly mow down his enemies one after another.

By the time I'd finished reading the novel, the sun was rising.

As a result, I ended up sleeping through basically all of my classes. Even so, once a lazy sixth period and a short homeroom were past, I decided to head for the clubroom.

“Hey! Wait, wait!”

As I entered the special building, I heard a voice call to me and turned around. Yuigahama was chasing after me; a flimsy-looking schoolbag banged against one shoulder with every step.

“Hikki, you don’t look so well. What’s wrong?”

“Ah, well, I mean, spending so much time reading that thing would make anyone tired… I’m seriously sleepy. Actually, how can *you* look completely fine after reading that?”

“Eh?”

Yuigahama blinked a few times.

“…Ah… y-you’re right. I’m sooooo sleepy right now…”

“You definitely didn’t read it, did you…?”

Yuigahama gazed out the window and hummed, ignoring my question. She was feigning innocence, but I could see cold sweat start to drip down her cheeks and neck. Would it show through her blouse…?

5-4

I opened the clubroom door and was greeted by the rare sight of Yukinoshita nodding off.

“Good work last night.”

Even after I called out to her, Yukinoshita's gentle, even breathing continued; she was still asleep. Her almost-smiling face was a far cry from her usual stern, sharp demeanor, and that change made my pulse quicken.

I almost felt as if I could just stay and watch her sleep forever. Her black hair, gently waving back and forth; her smooth, almost transparently white skin; her huge teary eyes; her well-formed pink lips…

Her lips lightly moved.

“…I’m surprised. One look at your face woke me right up.”

Uwah… I think I just woke up too. She deceived me with her pretty appearance, so I almost lost control. I really would love to just make that girl sleep… forever.

Yukinoshita let out a kitty-like yawn and stretched grandly, extending both her hands above her head.

“From the looks of it, you also had a pretty hard fight last night, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it’s been quite a while since I’ve worked all night… After all, I’ve never read anything quite like this. I don’t think I can bring myself to like this sort of thing very much.”

“Yeah. It was also pretty bad for me.”

“You didn’t read it at all. Go and read it now, dammit.”

At my words, Yuigahama let out a grumpy groan and took out the manuscript in question from her bag. There wasn’t a single crease in her copy; it was in perfect condition. Then Yuigahama began to flip through the manuscript at an insane pace.

She really looked bored out of her mind when she was reading it… I watched Yuigahama as she read and began to speak.

“It’s not like all light novels are like that. There are definitely a decent number of good ones.”

I was fully aware that that statement really did Zaimokuza no favors. Yukinoshita cocked her head to the side and spoke to me.

“Like the one you’ve been reading around the clubroom lately?”

“Yeah, that one was good. I recommend you try Gaga-“

“Maybe if I have time.”

It seemed that the “people who say that will never read it” rule was in full effect here… I heard a gruff knock on the clubroom door.

“This one begs your pardon…”

Zaimokuza once again spoke in an archaic fashion and entered into the room.

“Well then, let’s hear your impressions.”

Zaimokuza docked himself into a chair and crossed his arms arrogantly. There was a sense of superiority coming from God-knows-where on his face. It was an expression overflowing with confidence.

However, Yukinoshita, sitting across from him, looked unusually apologetic.

“I’m sorry. I don’t really understand these kinds of things too well, but…”

Yukinoshita started off with that, but Zaimokuza responded completely calmly.

“I don’t mind. Even ones such as I occasionally wish to hear the opinions of the common folk. Speak your mind.”

“I see.” Yukinoshita responded shortly and took a deep breath, steeling her resolve.

“It was boring. In fact, it was almost painful to read. It was boring beyond imagination.”

“Oofgh!”

Zaimokuza was cut down in a single stroke…

His chair rattled as he rocked backwards in it, but Zaimokuza managed to find his balance and sit upright again.

“H-hmm… Well then, for future reference, would you kindly inform me: which parts of the work were boring?”

“First off, the grammar was a mess. Why did you reverse the word order of sentences so much? Don’t you know how to use particles? Didn’t they teach you that in elementary school?”

“Nghhh… I believed that style would be better at engaging the readers with the work…”

“Shouldn’t you only think about things like that once you’ve managed to write past the bare minimum standard of proper Japanese? Additionally, you abuse furigana[1] far too often. Here you write ‘nouryoku’ but have the furigana ‘chikara’[2] above it… No one pronounces it that way. Furthermore, you wrote ‘Genkou Hasen’ here, which is more-or-less ‘Phantom Crimson Slash,’ but you wrote above it ‘Bloody Nightmare Slasher.’ Where exactly did the ‘nightmare’ come from?”

“Ufghh! O-Ooo… You’re wrong! All the supernatural battle novels lately have used lots of furigana…”

“That's strictly for your own self-satisfaction. It isn't going to reach anyone else. Do you really want others to read this? If you really do, then you also have to make it less predictable. I could tell what was coming in the story from miles away and there was no sign that things would get more interesting. And why is the heroine stripping here? There’s absolutely no lead-up to it.”

“Hnghhh! B-but novels that don’t have that kind of thing in them don’t sell… so you have to… That is…”

---

[1] Furigana: In Japanese writing, sometimes a kanji is used but is meant to be pronounced in a different way, which is indicated by small furigana above it. For example, you could write down the kanji for nightmare, 悪夢, which is pronounced “akumu,” but above it in small print you write “ナイトメア,” or “naitomea,” which is a clear reference to the English pronunciation. This is often used to force more “Western” pronunciations of certain things, especially proper nouns, but overuse of this technique can often make a work rather childish and heavy-handed.

[2] Nouryoku means “ability” while chikara means more something like “power.”

“Also, the narration is too long and has so many convoluted kanji, so it’s just really hard to read. Also, please refrain from trying to make people read an unfinished story. Before we even talk about literary style, maybe you should go and get some common sense.”

“Pnnghyahhh!!”

Zaimokuza stretched out his limbs and let out a shriek. His shoulders convulsed, and he looked up at the ceiling with blank eyes. His little overreaction was getting a bit annoying, so he really should stop that soon…

“Let’s stop there for now. It’d probably be bad if you went through everything in a single sitting.”

“I still have a lot more to say, though… Well then, fine. I suppose Yuigahama-san is next.”

“Eh?! M-me?!”

Yuigahama seemed shocked, and Zaimokuza faced her with a pleading expression. His eyes were tearing up. Yuigahama probably saw that and pitied the poor fellow, so she seemed to try and think of some compliment she could pay him. She fell into thought while staring off into the air and summoned up a few words of encouragement.

“U-umm… Y-you sure do know a lot of tough words…”)

“Uwaaagghhhh!!”

“You finished him off…”

To aspiring novelists, that phrase was an absolute taboo. After all, think about it… It meant that it was the *only* good thing Yuigahama could say about Zaimokuza’s novel. It was a common phrase to hear when someone writing a light novel asked people not used to light novels for their opinions. And it was absolutely equivalent to being told that your work was not interesting at all.

“W-well then… Hikki, go ahead.”

Yuigahama almost seemed to be running away when she stood up and offered me her seat. I sat right in front of Zaimokuza and Yuigahama took another seat diagonally behind me.

It seemed that she no longer could handle looking Zaimokuza straight in the eyes when he was in this completely burned-out, pale state.

“G-gnnghh… H-Hachiman. You understand me, right? The world I created, this vast landscape of light novel magnificence… You understand it, right? You understand this profound story I spun and all these other fools cannot hope to appreciate… Right?”

Yeah… I understood him all too well.

I nodded reassuringly. Zaimokuza looked at me with eyes of absolute trust.

I guess that as a man, I had to answer truthfully here. I took one deep breath and spoke kindly:

“So, just who did you rip-off to write that?”

“Hnghh?! B-bbnggh… *Gurgle*…”

Zaimokuza writhed back and forth on the floor, but stopped once he crashed right into the wall. Then he just lay there, not moving a muscle. His empty eyes stared up at the ceiling, and a single tear streaked down his cheek. It was the look of a man who was ready to die.)

“…You’re the one with no mercy. That was definitely much more cruel than mine.”

Yukinoshita was completely taken aback.

“…Hey, you…”

Yuigahama was poking me with her elbow… It seemed that she wanted me to follow up with something. But what exactly should I say here…? When I thought about it, though, I realized that I had forgotten to mention one of the most fundamental things when it came to light novels:

“Well, the important thing is the illustrations. So don’t worry so much about the writing.”

5-5

Zaimokuza did a few breathing exercises to calm himself down, as if he was in a Lamaze class, and then stood up on a newborn deer's shaky limbs.

Then he dusted himself off with his hands and looked directly at me.

“…Would you… read my work again?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. I fell into silence, unable to understand what he was saying, but he repeated himself… This time with a clearer, stronger voice.

“Would you read my work again?”

He faced me and Yukinoshita with fire in his eyes.

“You…”

“Are you a complete masochist?”

Yuigahama, who was hiding in my shadow, gave Zaimokuza a look of disgust. Her eyes seemed to say, *”You pervert, go die.”* No, Yuigahama… That wasn't it.

“Do you really want to do that again after everything you went through today?”

“Of course. That certainly was quite harsh criticism. That certainly did make me think that I wanted to die, that I’m unpopular and have no friends anyway… Or, rather, that made me want everyone else to die.”

“Yeah, I can see that… If someone said all that to me, I’d want to die too.”

But Zaimokuza had taken those words head-on, and was still here talking to us.

“However… However, those words still made me happy. To have something I wrote for fun read by someone else, critiqued by someone else… That is definitely not a bad thing. It’s not clear to me what I should call these feelings right now, though… But having my work read definitely makes me happy.”

Having said that, Zaimokuza smiled.

It wasn’t the smile of the master fencer general… It was the smile of Zaimokuza Yoshiteru.

Ahh… I see.

This guy wasn’t just a chuunibyou. No, he also suffered from a bad case of Writer Fever.

He wanted to write because he had something he wanted to tell others. And if he could touch someone's heart that way, then he was happy. So he would write and write and write, over and over again. Even if nobody acknowledged what he wrote, he would continue writing. That was what I called Writer Fever.

And so there was only one way I could respond:

“Sure, I’ll read it.”

I couldn't possibly refuse. After all, this was Zaimokuza’s final state of mind after he had truly come to terms with his chuunibyou. Even if others said he was sick, even if others frowned on him, even if others ignored him or ridiculed him, he would never bend to their wills, he would never give up, and he would continue to work desperately to bring his delusions into reality.

“When I finish a new novel, I’ll bring it here.”

Zaimokuza said those words, turned his back to us, and strode grandly from the room.

The sight of the door closing behind him was unpleasantly dazzling.

Even if he was warped, childish, or wrong, if he could force his ideas through, then that was exactly what he should do.

If he was willing to change just because someone rejected his ideas, than his dreams were not worthwhile and he was lying to himself. So Zaimokuza was fine like this.

…Well, except for those gross parts of his personality, anyway.

5-6

A few days had passed.

It was sixth period. The last class of the day was gym.

Just as always, I had been paired with Zaimokuza. Nothing there had changed.

“Hachiman. Who do you think is the most popular, most amazing illustrator out there right now?”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself--you can think about that after you win the prize.”

“Hm… Fair enough. The bigger issue is where I should make my debut…”

“Seriously, why are you assuming that you’re going to win?”

“…If it sells well, then maybe they can turn it into an anime and I can marry a seiyuu…”[1]

“That’s enough… Just stop it. Write the damn manuscript first, okay?”

---

[1] Japanese word for “voice actor.” It’s one of my rules to never translate this word, just because it has such a different nuance when put into English…

My gym class conversations with Zaimokusa began to go more or less like that. That was the only thing that had changed.

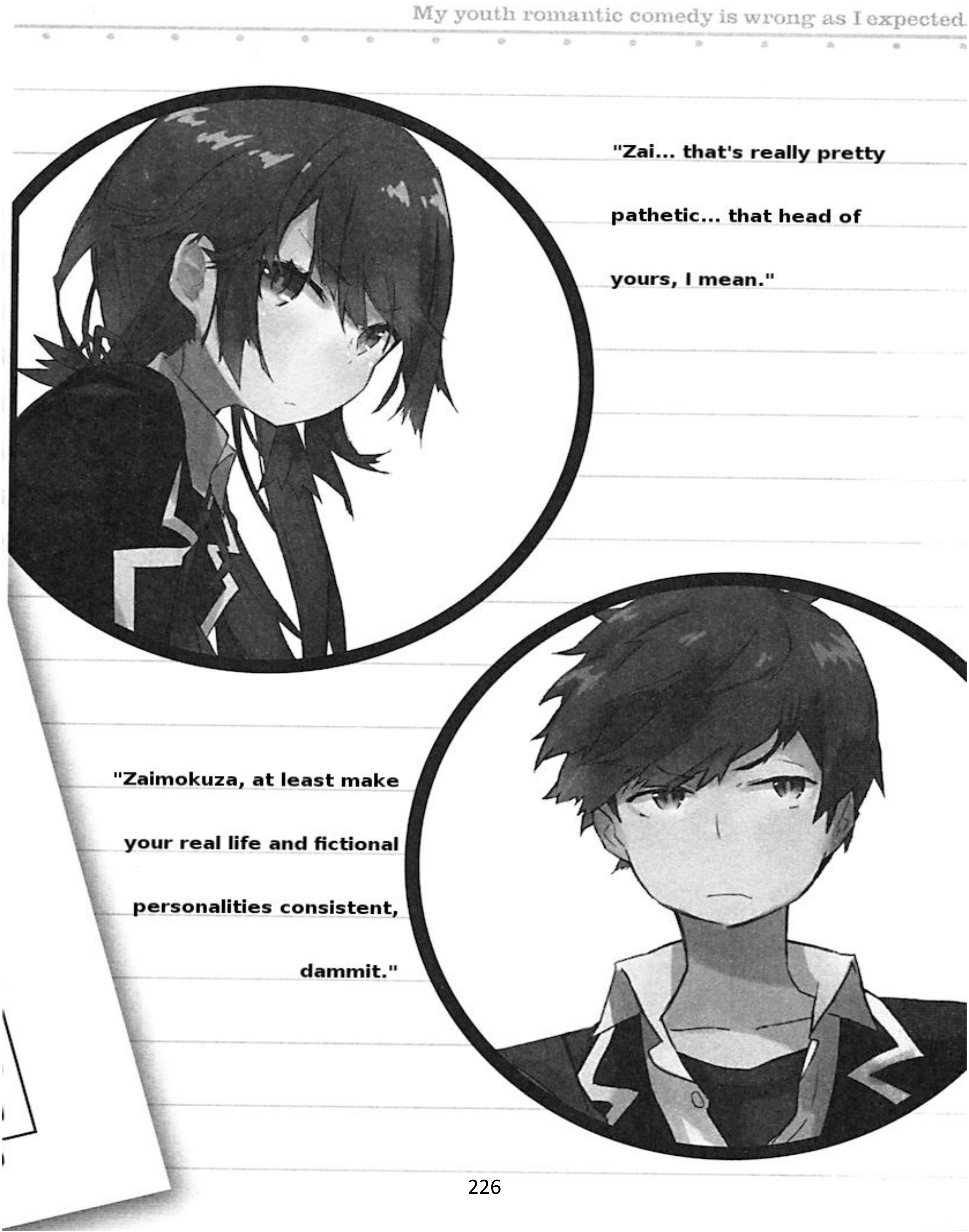
Well, that said, the contents of those conversations were pretty pointless… It's not like we were talking about particularly happy things, so unlike the other pairs, we never burst into laughter.

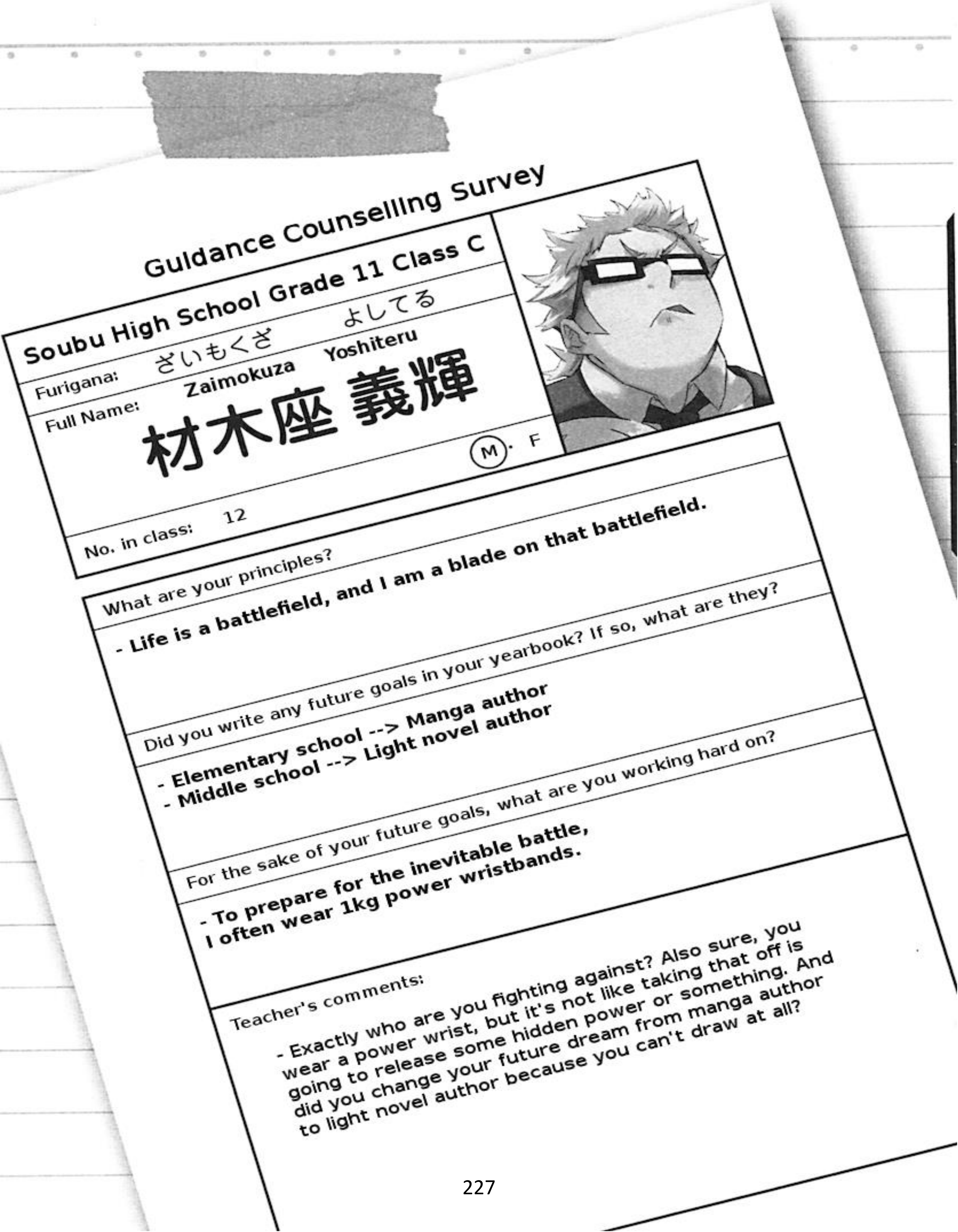
The stuff we talked about wasn't cool or trendy; it was just filled with pathetic things.

I really thought that we were idiots for doing that. I really felt that there was absolutely no point in it.

Even so… At the very least, gym was no longer an unpleasant time.

But that was all.


My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.
"Zai... that's really pretty pathetic... that head of yours, I mean."
"Zaimokuza, at least make your real life and fictional personalities consistent, dammit."



Guidance Counselling Survey

Soubu High School Grade 11 Class C

Furigana: さいもくざ よしてる

Full Name: Zaimokuza Yoshiteru

材木座 義輝

[✓ M] · F

No. in class: 12

What are your principles?

- Life is a battlefield, and I am a blade on that battlefield.

Did you write any future goals in your yearbook? If so, what are they?

- Elementary school --> Manga author
- Middle school --> Light novel author

For the sake of your future goals, what are you working hard on?

**- To prepare for the inevitable battle,
I often wear 1kg power wristbands.**

Teacher's comments:

- Exactly who are you fighting against? Also sure, you wear a power wrist, but it's not like taking that off is going to release some hidden power or something. And did you change your future dream from manga author to light novel author because you can't draw at all?

Chapter 6: However, Totsuka Saika is coming along.

Komachi, my little sister, had a piece of toast in one hand and was completely absorbed in a fashion magazine. I watched her out of the corner of my eye as I drank my morning cup of black coffee.

Annoying phrases like “how to get a man” and “super trendy” appeared repeatedly; in general, the article seemed to be filled to the very brim with idiocy. I found my mouth had opened blankly, dribbling coffee out of the corner of my lips.

Will Japan really be okay like this? That article was seriously lowest common denominator, and yet my little sister was nodding as she read it. What the hell was there to agree with?

That “Heaventeen” magazine or whatever seemed to be the biggest fashion magazine for middle school girls. It was at the point where people didn’t just read it--it was more that if you didn’t read it, you would get bullied at school.

“Ohhh…” Komachi sounded impressed by something. Bread crumbs rained on the magazine page. Was she trying to be a one-person Hansel and Gretel or something?

It was seven forty-five AM.

"Hey, the time."

My little sister was still engrossed in her magazine, so I poked her shoulder with my elbow, trying to tell her that it was time for her to go to school. Once I did that, Komachi suddenly raised her head to check the clock.

"Uwahh, oh no!"

Komachi shouted that, then immediately shut her magazine and stood right up.

"Wait wait wait wait, you--look at your mouth. You still got something there."

"Eh, really? My mouth is all jammed up?"

"Your mouth some sort of automatic rifle now? That's definitely not the right way to use 'jammed up.'"[1]

"Oh no, oh no." She continued rushing around and wiped her mouth with her pajama sleeve. You know, my little sister can be pretty masculine sometimes…

---

[1] I just want to mention that after translating so many volumes of light novels, this is probably the very first pun I've encountered that I could translate almost verbatim into English. Bring out the champagne.

“By the way, oniichan,[2] sometimes you just don’t know what you’re saying, do you?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t know! You are!”

But my panicked little sister didn’t seem to even hear what I was saying and began to change into her uniform. She took off her pajamas, showing her smooth, white skin, her white sports bra, and her white panties.

Don’t strip right here, dammit…

Little sisters are strange entities: no matter how cute they are, you never feel anything at all. To me, her underwear was simply a piece of cloth. She certainly was cute, but in the end, all I could think was that she really did resemble me… That's how it is with real little sisters.

Komachi, now dressed in her unfashionable school uniform, gave me a view of her panties through her knee-height skirt as she pulled on her socks and folded them at her shins. I watched her from the corner of my eye as I reached out for the sugar and milk.

Was she trying to grow bigger breasts or something? Komachi had been drinking lots of milk lately… Whatever. I didn’t care at all.

---

[2] Fairly standard, somewhat affectionate honorific for older brothers.

But putting "the milk my little sister drank" in quote marks like that made it sound a bit immoral and erotic… Whatever. I don't care at all.

It's not like I grabbed the sugar and milk because the milk was "the milk my little sister drank." I just wanted to add them to my coffee.

As someone born and bred in Chiba, someone who took his first bath in MAX Coffee, someone who was raised on MAX Coffee[3] instead of breast milk, I had to have sugar when I drank coffee. Condensed milk was even better.

But I could drink coffee black too if I had to.

"Life is too bitter, so coffee, at least, should be sweet…"

I mumbled something that was honestly worthy of a MAX Coffee commercial as I finished drinking my now-sweetened coffee.

That was good… That line. They really should use it.

"Oniichan! I'm ready!"

"But your oniichan is still drinking his coffee…"

---

[3] A sweetened coffee drink. Actually, one of the only places in Japan these things are sold is in Chiba, so this makes sense.

I responded with a poor impression of something from a rerun of “Kita no Kuni kara”[4], but Komachi didn’t seem to notice and just started singing happily. “Gonna be laaate~~. Gonna be laaate~~.” Did she actually want to be late or was she saying we shouldn’t be late…? I couldn’t tell.)=

A few months ago, this idiot sister of mine completely overslept. Just when it seemed that she would definitely be late, I put her on the back of my bike and gave her a ride to school.

Ever since then, little by little, the frequency with which I took her to school had been steadily rising.

There is nothing less trustworthy than a girl’s tears. That was especially true with Komachi, who apparently was well-equipped with the skills often possessed by the younger siblings. She could masterfully manipulate her older brother. What a nasty girl… She was responsible for my belief that all girls are like her, always using boys for their own selfish gains.

“It’s your fault if I stop trusting women, you know. What am I going to do if I grow old without getting married?”

“If that happens, then Komachi will do something about it.”

---

[4] Japanese TV drama.

Komachi gave me a smile. I thought my little sister would always remain a child, but seeing that strangely mature look on her face made my heart beat a bit faster.

“I’ll work hard to save money and put you in a nursing home.”

Maybe she was mature… Or maybe she was just trying to sound like an adult.

“…I guess you really are my little sister, huh…?”

I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a sigh.

I drained the last of my coffee and stood up. When I did that, Komachi began to push me from behind.

“Oniichan is being slow, so it’s already this late! Komachi is going to be laaate~~!”

“You damn brat…”

If she wasn’t my little sister, then I would've already sent her flying. Things were flipped in the Hikigaya household. My dad was unusually doting when it came to my little sister; he's been known to say that he would kill any boy who came close to my sister, even if that boy was her older brother. Hearing him say that seriously nauseated me. But in the end, if I sent my little sister flying, then I probably would be kicked out of the family.

So in short, not only was I the lowest rung the school social ladder, I was even the lowest rung in my own family.

We left the house and I mounted my bike. Komachi got on behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist to hold me tight.

“Let’s go!”

“Hasn’t anybody taught you how to say ‘thank you’?”

Riding double on a bicycle is forbidden by the Road Traffic Law, but Komachi has the mind of a child, so please go easy on us…

I lightly set off. Soon Komachi spoke up.

“Don’t crash today, okay? Komachi is riding with you this time.”

“So it’s okay for me to crash if I’m by myself…?”

“No no no. Oniichan, sometimes you get this glassy dead-fish look in your eyes… I worry about you. This is what they call a little sister’s love, you know?”

Komachi said that and pressed her face into my back. If she had left out that first part then I would have been tempted to call her cute, but now she just seemed like a sly brat.

But to be honest… I didn’t want to cause my family any pointless anxiety either.

“… Yeah, I’ll be careful.”

“Make sure you’re especially careful when Komachi is on board. Seriously.”

“You’re begging me to pick the bumpiest way to school, right?”

But, naturally, I didn’t want a repeat of the last time I did that. All I got was “Ow, that hurts!” “That hit my butt!” and “Now I’ll never be able to get married!” the entire way, so I chose a pretty level path. All her outbursts that one time gave me a bad reputation in the neighborhood, you know…

In any case, safety first.

I had gotten into a traffic accident on my first day of school. I was pretty nervous about starting a new life at my new school, but I sealed my fate when I chose to leave an hour early for the school entrance ceremony.

I think it was around seven in the morning… A girl walking her dog near the school lost her grip on the leash when, unfortunately, an expensive-looking limousine was coming down the road. Before I knew it, I had began to hurtle towards them at full speed.

And so they had to call an ambulance to take me to the hospital. That was the moment that destined me to be alone through high school.

That accident wrecked my sparkling brand-new bike, and I got a hairline fracture in my golden left foot.[5]

If I were a soccer player, then a dark shadow would have been cast over the Japanese soccer world that day. Thank God I wasn’t.

And it was a relief that my injuries weren’t that severe.

What wasn't a relief was the fact that the only people who came to visit me in the hospital were family.

My family came to visit me once every three days. Dammit, at least visit me every day…

---

[5] A term often used to refer to soccer players who are especially proficient with their left foot.

After my accident, my sister and parents began to eat out a lot. Every time my sister came and talked about how they had gone to eat sushi or Korean barbeque, I wanted to just reach out and snap her pinky.

“But it was pretty nice how fast you healed. That plaster cast must have really helped, I’m sure. Plaster is the best way to heal bruises, after all!”

“You idiot, you’re mixing up plaster and ointment, aren’t you?[6] Also, I had a fracture, not a bruise.”

“Oniichan is going off and saying weird things again.”

“Ugh! You’re the one who doesn’t understand!”

But Komachi didn’t seem to be listening to me; she changed the topic as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Ja know, oniichan…”

“Hm? ‘Ja know’? Is that an Issei Fuu** Sepia[7] reference? You’re reaaally dating yourself there.”

---

[6] Plaster (the kind used in casts) and ointment are very similar in Japanese. It’s “sekkou” versus “nankou.”

[7] Reference to Issei Fuubi Sepia, a musical group active in the 1980s. Komachi says “soiya,” which is a weird way of saying “souieba,” which apparently is something this group is known for saying.

"*You know, oniichan*… There must be something wrong with your ears."

"You're the one who can't speak properly…"

"You know, after that accent, that dog's owner came to thank us."

"I never heard about this…"

"Oniichan was sleeping then. Also, she gave us some candy. It was pretty good."

"Hey, I definitely don't remember eating those sweets. Why did you eat all of them and not tell me?"

I said that, and as I looked behind me, I saw that Komachi was giving me a shy "tehehe" kind of smile. This brat was seriously annoying…

"But you know… She went to the same school, so haven't you seen her around? She said she would thank you there."

I reflexively slammed on the breaks. "Auu!" I heard a scream from behind me, and then Komachi's face dug itself into my back.

"What just happened?"

"…You… Why didn't you tell me that earlier? Did you ask her what her name was or anything?"

"Eh? …She was the 'candy person,' right…?"

"Is it the Bon Festival or something? Don't say it like the 'ham person'[8]. So, what was her name?"

"Hmm, I forget… Ahh, we got to my school. Komachi is going ahead!"

As soon as she said that, Komachi hopped off the bike and dashed off towards the school gate.

"You damn brat…"

I glared at my little sister's retreating back, but right before she disappeared into the school building, Komachi turned around to give me a quick bow.

"I'm off, oniichan! Thank you for the ride!"

---

[8] This is a reference to a brand of ham sold by the Marudai food company that was marketed as a good type of ham to give as a gift during holiday times. The "ham person" or "ham man" (I didn't use the latter here because Komachi is referring to a girl) is a reference to Bessho Tetsuya, an actor who was in so many commercials for these ham products that he picked up "Ham man" as a nickname (You can see an example here). This is a bit of an unfortunate spot of translation catch 22, since "candy man" is actually a recognizable phrase in English, while "ham man" is not, but it is the reverse in Japanese.

When I heard that and saw her waving at me with a smile, even I felt that my little sister was a bit cute. I waved back, but then I heard my little sister add, “And be sure to watch out for cars!”

I let out a resigned sigh and swiveled my bike around, beginning to head for my high school…

…towards the high school where that dog’s owner might be.

It’s not like I had some master plan of what I'd do once I met her. I just was a little curious.

But we hadn’t met for a year after that incident, so that made me think that she didn’t really care about meeting me… Well, that was natural. All I'd done was break my bones to save her dog. It was totally enough for her to just send a thank-you gift to my house.

My gaze suddenly fell on the basket attached to the front of my bike, where I saw a black schoolbag that wasn't mine.

“… That idiot.”

The minute I turned my bike around and to rush in the opposite direction, I spotted Komachi running towards me with tears in her eyes.

6-2

Different months meant different activities in gym class.

In my school, gym was held jointly with three different classes, and the sixty boys in that group were split into two activities.

We had the choice between volleyball and track until this month. Now we would be doing tennis or soccer.

Naturally, both Zaimokuza and I were brilliant soccer players[1], but we both placed more emphasis on individual skills. Therefore, we concluded that it would actually be counterproductive for us to join the soccer team, so we chose tennis instead. And, naturally… I was a man who had abandoned soccer forever because of the old wounds on my left foot. Not that I ever played soccer to begin with…

However, it seemed that too many people wanted to play tennis this year. And so, after a heroic round of rock paper scissors, I found myself surviving in the tennis group even as Zaimokuza was thrown back to the soccer group.

“Hmph, Hachiman… It is truly regrettable that I will be unable to put my magical curveball on display here. Without you… Who in the world should I partner up with for passing practice…?”

---

[1] He uses the phrase “fantasista,” which is Italian in origin but way too obscure in English for me to leave raw in the text.

That made quite a deep impression on me: Zaimokuza had gone from his usual confident demeanor to teary-eyed desperation.

Who in the world would be your partner? That applied to me, too.

And so tennis class began.

I did some half-assed stretching and then listened to a tennis lecture from our gym teacher, Atsugi.

“Okay, everyone try hitting now. Pair up, one on each side of the net.”

Once Atsugi had said that, everyone split up into small groups and went to opposite sides of the court.

How the hell did they pair up so fast? They didn’t even look around! Were they masters of the no-look pass[2] or something?

My sensitive loner radar began to act up, detecting an elevated chance of a loner opportunity.

Fear not: I had developed a special trick for times like these.

---

[2] Reference to soccer when a player passes a ball to another player without looking.

“Umm, I’m not feeling so well right now, so can I go just play by myself off the wall? I don’t want to cause anybody else any trouble.”

I announced that and, without waiting for Atsugi’s response, I quickly walked towards the wall and began hitting off it. Atsugi probably saw that he had missed the best timing to respond to me, so he didn’t argue with me at all.

That was way too perfect…

The statements “not feeling so well” and “cause anybody else trouble” had a great synergistic effect, and using them also allowed me to nonchalantly act as if I actually did have the motivation to work hard.

This was it: the master countermeasure that I had discovered after so many gym classes where I was told to “pair up with whomever you like.” Maybe I should teach Zaimokuza some day… I’m sure that guy would break out into tears of joy.

I chased after the ball and hit it back at the wall, repeating that motion over and over again. Time trickled by as I continued with that humdrum activity.

I heard boisterous shouts from around me as the other boys engaged in flashy tennis rallies.

“Uryahhh! Ohh?! That was a good shot, wasn’t it?! That was amazing, wasn’t it?!”

“That was great! No way anybody else could’ve hit that! Awesome!”

Their shouting suggested that they were definitely having fun during their free practice session.

”Shut up and die…” I thought as I turned around, when I saw Hayama.

Hayama’s pair--or, rather, he seemed to be in a group of four--consisted of himself, a blonde that I’d seen hanging out with him a lot in class, and two others that I didn’t really recognize. They were probably from class C or class I or something… At any rate, they were practically exuding an aura of flashy stylishness as they played.

“Woahh!” The blonde missed the return on a ball that Hayama hit and shouted. Everyone turned towards them, wondering what had happened.

“Hayama-kun, that was seriously something else! Did that ball curve? It curved, didn’t it?!”

“Ahh, I guess I accidentally sliced the ball… Sorry, that was my bad.”

Hayama raised a hand in apology, but his words were drowned out by the blonde’s next overreaction.

“Seriously?! You can hit curve balls and stuff like that?! Hayama is the real deal, man! The real deal!”

“Haha, really?”

Hayama decided to join in, laughing happily. At that point, the pair hitting next to Hayama and company also spoke up.

“Hayama-kun is good at tennis too, isn’t he? That slice you just did right now… Could you teach me how to do that too?”

The guy who said that and started to walk towards Hayama was a boy with dyed brown hair who otherwise looked pretty meek. We were probably in the same class. I didn’t know his name, so he probably was no big deal.

In the blink of an eye, Hayama’s quartet had grown into a sextet. They were now the largest ruling body of this gym class… By the way, “sextet” sounds a lot like “sexaroid,”[3] doesn’t it? Yup, yup, so naughty…

In any case, that was how tennis class became the Hayama Kingdom. It almost felt as if you shouldn’t be in the class if you weren’t part of their group. Naturally, everyone outside of the Hayama group was silent. Farewell, freedom of speech…

---

[3] Not in English, Hachiman. Not in English. Also, for those of you who don’t know what a sexaroid is… it’s exactly what it sounds like.

The noisiness of the Hayama group gave off a strong impression, but Hayama himself wasn’t making much of that noise--it was more the people around him. More specifically, that blonde guy, who had volunteered to be the Chief of Staff of the Hayama Kingdom, was the noisiest.

“Slice!”

See? He’s insanely noisy.

The ball the blonde guy hit wasn’t a slice at all, and it instead flew completely off course from Hayama into the damp, dark corner of the court. In other words, it flew towards me.

“Ah, sorry, my bad! U-Umm… Hi…? Hikitani-kun? Hikitani-kun, could you get that ball?”

Who the hell was Hikitani?

But I didn't feel like correcting him, so I just grabbed the ball that was rolling towards me and threw it back.

“Thanks!”

Hayama gave me a cheerful smile and waved at me.

In response, I gave him a small nod.

…Why the hell did I nod back?

It seemed that I had instinctively come to think of Hayama as above me… Even by my standards, that was really submissive. It was so submissive that it made me think that even in terms of submissiveness I was probably losing to someone…

I took these gloomy feelings of mine and hit them against the wall.

Walls were essential companions in youth.

…On that note, I wonder why “plaster wall” is slang for “small breasts”?

By one theory, plaster walls are just tanuki spirits[4], and the wall itself is the tanuki spirit spreading its genitals. What kind of wall was that supposed to be? That actually sounded surprisingly soft… And so, in other words, quite paradoxically, when you ridiculed a girl with small breasts by calling her a plaster wall, weren’t you saying that her breasts were pretty soft? QED, proof over. Idiots.

However, I’m sure that Hayama would never come to that conclusion. That miraculous theory was only made possible by my unusual resentment.

All right, let’s call it a tie for today then… Yup, that sounds about right.

---

[4] Raccoon dog, similar to a fox. Known to be mischievous.

6-3

It was lunch break.

I was eating lunch in my usual spot. My home base was on the first floor of the special building, to the side of the nurse’s office and diagonally behind the cafeteria. To give you a better idea, it was a position from which I could see right out into the tennis courts.

I leisurely ate the hot dog[1], tuna onigiri[2], and Neapolitan roll[3] I had bought from the cafeteria.

And I was at peace.

All the while, a rhythmic drumming sound lured me to sleep.

The tennis girls had their independent practice session at noon, so they were outside at the wall; they hit the ball and made heroic efforts to chase it when it returned, and then they hit it again.

---

[1] He says “wiener roll,” but to me that’s a friggin hot dog.

[2] Onigiri is a triangular shaped cake of rice, often with filling (in this case tuna).

[3] Apparently it has soba noodles and stuff in it. What in the world….

I followed their movements with my eyes as I ate my lunch. As the lunch break was about to end, I sucked some lemon tea out of its pack through a straw and felt the wind blow.

The wind’s direction had changed.

It varied with the day-to-day weather, but because this school was near the sea, the wind would usually change direction some time around noon. It was almost as if the morning's sea breeze was returning from whence it came.

Spending some time alone, just feeling that wind on my skin, wasn’t a bad thing at all.

“Huh? Hikki, is that you?”

That same wind carried a familiar voice to my ears. When I turned around, I saw Yuigahama standing there, holding down her skirt to protect it from any more gusts of wind.

“Whatcha doin’ over here?”

“I usually eat here.”

“Hmm, really? Why? Wouldn’t it be better to just eat in the classroom?”

“…”

Yuigahama seemed genuinely bewildered, but I just responded to her question with silence. Seriously, if I could do that, do you really think I’d be out here eating…? Pay attention, dammit.

Let’s change the subject.

“More importantly, why are *you* here?”

“Oh yeah! Truth is, I lost a game of rock paper scissors with Yukinon, so… I guess this is my penalty?”

“Talking to me is a penalty…?”

That was so sad… Made me want to die.

“N-no, no! The loser had to go buy juice! That’s it!”

Yuigahama hurriedly waved her hands, denying my accusation. What a relief; after that, I was totally ready to kill myself…

Yuigahama smoothed down her chest in relief, then she plopped herself down next to me.

“Yukinon didn’t like it at first. ‘I can provide my own food. What do I stand to gain, aside from winning a trivial competition?’ That's what she said.”

For some reason, Yuigahama was trying to imitate Yukinoshita. She completely failed.

“Well, that does sound like her.”

“Yeah, but then I said, ‘So you don’t think you can win?’ Then she agreed to play.”

“… Well, that does sound like her.”

That girl was usually the very picture of cool, but when it came to competitions, she really hated to lose. She'd instantly gotten on board before as soon as Hiratsuka-sensei challenged her.

“And then, when Yukinon won, she pumped her fists a bit… It was really cute, you know…”

Yuigahama let out a happy sigh.

“I think this is the first time I’ve thought this penalty game was fun.”

“You’ve done this game before?”

When I asked that question, Yuigahama gave me a nod.

“Yeah, a few times before…”

Hearing that allowed me to suddenly remember. Near the end of lunch breaks, there was always an idiotically noisy corner of the room shouting about rock paper scissors…

“Tch, a nice little exclusive club you all have there.”

“What’s up with that lousy reaction? You don’t like things like that?”

“Of course not. I hate private parties and inside jokes… Ah, but I do like internal strife. Cuz I’m not on the inside!”

“Not only is that a sad reason, but you sound completely petty!”

Shut up. Leave me alone…

Yuigahama smiled as she held her hair, keeping the wind from blowing it. That expression was different from the one I usually saw when she was with Miura and the others in the classroom…

Ahh, I see. If I had to guess, I'd say she wasn't wearing as much makeup. Her face had become much more natural. She'd probably made that change a while back, but, I mean, it's not like I make a habit of staring at girls' faces… Ugh, whatever.

But that was proof that she had changed, even if only a little.

It might've been because she had less makeup on, but… When Yuigahama smiled, her eyes relaxed[4] and her youthful face became even more youthful.

"But really, I think Hikki has a lot of these 'private parties' too. When we're in the classroom, you always have those fun-looking chats with Yukinon. I-I always feel I can't join in on any of those…"

As Yuigahama said that, she hugged her knees and buried her face in them. She was glancing sideways towards me.

"You know, cuz maybe I want to join in on those talks too… I-it's not like I mean that in a weird way, okay?! W-when I say that I mean Yukinon too, okay?! You got that?!"

---

[4] The more literal translation here would be "drooped," but that sounds rather ugly in English.

“Have no fear… It’s not like I’ll ever make that sort of misunderstanding when it comes to you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Yuigahama lifted up her head, looking pretty pissed. “Ah, hold on, hold on, calm down!” I restrained her with my hands and spoke up.

“Well, Yukinoshita is a different story. She is just a force majeure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hm? Ahh, ‘force majeure’ refers to an entity or situation that is impossible to defy by our human strength alone. Sorry for using big words there.”

“No! I know what that means, ugh! You know, you insult me way too much! I took the entrance exam and got into Soubu High just like you, all right?!”

Yuigahama sent a quick chop right into my throat. The clean hit, right to my Adam’s Apple, sent me into a coughing fit. Then Yuigahama stared off into the distance and asked me a question, sounding serious.

“…Hey, speaking of the entrance exam… Do you remember the first day of school?”

"*Cough cough cough!*… Huh? Ahh, I mean, not really--I got into a traffic accident that day."

"Accident…"

"Yeah. On the first day of school, I was pedaling my bike when some idiot's dog got off its leash. That dog almost got run over by a car, so I protected him with my own body… Naturally, it was a brilliantly dashing and heroic act."

I think that I embellished that story a bit, but it's not like anybody else knew about it… And if nobody knew about it, then nobody would say anything. So in situations like this, it was best for me to make myself look better.

But when she heard that, Yuigahama's face stiffened.

"I-idiot, huh… So, Hikki doesn't remember that person at all?"

"I mean, I really couldn't have, since I was in so much pain. Well, clearly I wasn't impressed enough to remember, so I'm guessing that person was pretty plain-looking."

"(whisper) Plain-looking… W-well, I guess I didn't have makeup on that time… and my hair wasn't dyed, and I was wearing some random pajamas or something… Ah, and the pajamas had little bears on them too, so maybe I did look a bit like an idiot…"

Yuigahama’s voice was so low that I couldn’t hear her at all--I just saw her lips moving as she muttered something and stared at the floor. Did her tummy hurt or something?

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s… nothing… Anyways! Hikki doesn’t remember that girl at all, does he?!”

“Yeah, like I said, I don’t remember… Wait, huh? Did I mention that they were a girl?”

“Huh?! Y-yeah, you definitely did! You totally did! In fact, all you said was, ‘girl this, girl that, girl this, girl that’!!”

“Am I seriously that gross of a person…?”

When I said that, Yuigahama just gave me a loud, hollow-sounding laugh and, with a smile still on her face, turned to look at the tennis courts. In response, I turned and did the same.

I guess it was just about time for the girl tennis players to wrap up their practice; they were wiping off their sweat and coming back.

“Hey! Sai-chaan~~!”

Yuigahama waved her hands and called out. It seemed she'd spotted someone she knew.

That girl noticed Yuigahama and ran up to us with little steps.

“Hey. Had practice?”

“Yeah. Our team is really weak right now, so we have to practice through lunch… We’ve been asking them over and over for permission to use the courts during lunch, and they finally gave us the okay. What are Yuigahama-san and Hikigaya-kun doing here?”

“Ahh, not much…”

Yuigahama said that and turned to me, as if to ask for confirmation. Well, I was actually eating lunch, and you were on your way to finish an errand, right? She had the attention span of a bird or something…

“I see.” That girl, Sai-chan or whatever, gave us a smile.

“Sai-chan, you play tennis for class and even practice through lunch… That must be really tough.”

“Yeah, but it’s what I want to do, so it’s fine… Ah, also, Hikigaya-kun, you’re pretty good at tennis.”

To my surprise, she turned the conversation to me, so of course I fell silent. It was the first time that I'd heard that. Also, who the hell was this person? Why did she know my name?

“Ohh…?” I wanted to ask her a few things, but before I could, Yuigahama butted in, sounding impressed.

“Really?”

“Yeah, his form is really good when he plays.”

“Ahh, you’re embarrassing me, ha ha ha… *(whisper) So, who is this person?*”

I said the last bit soft enough to make sure only Yuigahama could hear me, but Yuigahama smashed my efforts to itty bitty pieces.

“Hwahhh?! You’re in the same class! You even take gym class together! Why don’t you know?! I can’t believe you!”

“You idiot, of course I know! I just happened to forget! …And boys and girls don’t take gym class together!

I was trying to be so considerate, and she completely ruined my efforts… Now everyone in the world would know that I didn't know this girl's name. And now she's probably in a bad mood…

As I thought that, I glanced in Sai-chan's direction and saw that her eyes were tearing up… Crap, this was bad. In dog terms, she looked like a Chihuahua, and in cat terms, she looked like a munchkin… That was how cute and sad-looking she was.

"A-Ahaha. So I guess you really don't remember my name… I'm Totsuka Saika. We're in the same class."

"A-ah, sorry about that. We changed classes recently, so it's a bit difficult for me… Haha."

"We were in the same class during the first year too… Ehehe, maybe I just don't have much of a presence…"

"Nah, that's not it… Oh, I got it! It's just that I don't hang out with the girls in our class very much! You know, I still don't know the real name of this girl here!"

"Cut it out and remember!"

Yuigahama smacked me on the head, but even that caused Totsuka to mutter with a grim look on her face.

“You sure are good friends with Yuigahama-san…”

“E-ehh?! W-we’re definitely not! If anything, all I want to do is kill this guy! Kill Hikki and then I’ll die too… That sort of thing!”

“Yeah, that’s it! …Also, that’s damn scary! You’re damn scary! Lover’s suicide?![5] I don’t want that at all!”

“Huh?! A-are you a complete idiot?! I didn’t mean it like that at all!”

“You two really are pretty close…”

Totsuka said that in a sad tone, and this time faced me.

“I’m male, by the way… do I really look that frail to you?”

“Eh?”

My thoughts and movements completely halted at that moment. I quickly looked to Yuigahama. *That’s a lie, right?* I asked with my eyes. But Yuigahama, seemingly still angry, her cheeks still flushed red, just gave me a few strong nods.

---

[5] Where two people in love kill themselves together.

Wait… Seriously? That can’t be right. That has to be a joke.

Totsuka saw my doubtful gaze and turned bright red. Her head lowered, and she stared at me with upturned eyes.

Totsuka’s hand slowly reached down towards her (his?) shorts. That small movement was already enough to captivate me.

“…I can show you proof, if you want.”

I felt something inside of my heart twitch.

A little devil Hachiman appeared on my right shoulder. *”Ohh, that’s great, you should just go ahead and take a look--you might get really lucky, ya know?”* Well, that’s true… This was a pretty rare chance, after all. *”Wait just a second!”* Ahh, and now the angel Hachiman has arrived. *”While you’re at it, how about you ask her to take off her top too?”* What the hell… What kind of crappy angel was this?

In the end, I decided to listen to my own common sense.

Yes, with these kind of androgynous characters, their entire appeal lay in the fact that their gender was so ambiguous! And so, by reaching this logical conclusion, I was able to calm down and proceed with a cool head.

"In any case… I'm sorry. I really didn't know, but I apologize if I caused you any discomfort."

When Totsuka heard me say that, he shook off the tears that had been building up in his eyes and gave me a smile.

"Nah, it's fine."

"But, Totsuka… I'm surprised you know my name."

"Eh, ahh… Well, Hikigaya-kun stands out a lot in class."

After Totsuka said that, Yuigahama stared at me.

"Reeaaally? But he's so plain-looking… It'd take quite a lot to notice a guy like him."

"You idiot, of course I stand out! I stand out like a bunch of glittering stars in the night sky!"[6]

"How exactly?"

---

[6] This is a rather bad misuse of this idiom, which generally is used to refer to only a group of people.

Wow, she said that back to me without batting an eyelash.

“…W-well, when someone sits in the corner of the classroom and talks to himself, doesn’t that make him stand out a bit…?”

“Ah, *that’s* what stands-… Ahh, umm… My condolences…”

Yuigahama looked away from me. That was exactly the type of attitude that made me gloomy, though…

The atmosphere was getting heavier again, so Totsuka decided to try and save it.

“But seriously, Hikigaya-kun is pretty good at tennis. Have you played before?”

“I mean, I played a bit of Mario Tennis during elementary school, but I haven’t played real tennis.”

“Oh, that’s the one everyone plays together. I played that too, you know. Playing doubles was reaaally fun, wasn’t it~~?”

“…I’ve only played it by myself.”

“Eh? ……Ah. Umm, sorry.”

“What the hell, are you a psychological minesweeper or something? Is it your job to dig up every little bit of trauma I have?”

“Hikki’s the one who has way too many bombs!”

Totsuka, standing to the side, seemed to be having fun watching the exchange between me and Yuigahama.

And like that, the bell that announced the end of lunch break rang.

“Let’s head back.”

Totsuka said that, and Yuigahama followed after him.

I watched them from behind and suddenly felt a bit strange.

I see… They were in the same class, so it was natural for them to leave together… For some reason I felt moved by that.

“Hikki? What are you doing?”

Yuigahama turned back towards me, seeming puzzled. Totsuka also stopped walking and faced me.

I could go together with them? I was about to ask, but I stopped.

Instead, I said the following:

“What happened to that juice you were supposed to buy?”

“Huh? … Ahhh!!”

6-4

A few days later, I was in gym class again.

Because of my repeated practice sessions with the wall, I had become a master of tennis wall hitting. At this point, I could hold up a rally with the wall without having to move a step in any direction.

After tomorrow’s class, we would be starting tennis matches for a bit. In other words, today was the last time I would be able to just practice rallying.

It was my last rally practice, so I thought I would use it to its fullest, but then I felt something poking me on the right shoulder.

And who might this fairy behind my back be? There wasn’t anyone who would talk to me, so this had to be some kind of supernatural phenomenon, right?

I turned around, when I felt a finger poke into my right cheek.

“Ahah, caught you~.”

It was Totsuka Saika, giving me a cute smile.

Oof, what was this I was feeling…? My heart was seriously pounding. If he wasn't a guy, I would have asked him out and then gotten rejected on the spot. Wow, so I guess I would get rejected here?

I mean, once you saw Totsuka in his uniform it was plain as day that he was a guy, but when he wore his gym uniform, which was the same for guys and girls, his gender really wasn't obvious. If his socks were black and went higher than his ankles, you definitely wouldn't be able to tell.

His arms, legs, and waist were all slender, and his skin was pale white.

Well, it was true that he didn't have very large breasts, but it's not like Yukinoshita had those either.

For some reason, I felt a horrible shiver run up my spin.

So having cooled down, I spoke up to Totsuka, who was standing there still smiling at me.

"What did you want?"

"Ah. Today you know, the guy I usually pair up with isn't at school. So… umm, if you want, wanna be my partner?"

Stop looking at me with upturned eyes, dammit. You look way too cute like that. Stop blushing, ugh.

“Ahh, that’s fine. I’m by myself right now too.”

Sorry, wall. I can’t hang out with you today…

After I apologized to the wall and responded to Totsuka, he seemed relieved. “*Phew*, what a relief!” I heard him mutter.

Dammit, hearing that made me nervous. He was seriously way too cute.

According to Yuigahama, Because of how cute Totsuka was, some of the girls at school had begun calling him “the Prince.” I see, considering Totsuka was a pretty boy who had a feminine sense of cuteness, that name fit him to a tee. In addition, the name “the Prince” also made you want to protect him.

With that, my free practice with Totsuka began.

Totsuka was on the tennis team, so it was no surprise that he was good.

He got to the superb serve I had mastered in my wall-hitting sessions, and returned the ball right at me.

After we had repeated those motions over and over, Totsuka even started to strike up a conversation, almost as if he was getting bored.

“As I thought, Hikigaya-kun is pretty good.”

Because we were pretty far from each other, Totsuka was speaking pretty slowly.

“I was super awesome at wall hitting, so that makes me a tennis master.”

“That’s squash, not tennis…”

As our slow, drawn-out sentences went back and forth, Totsuka and I continued hitting the ball to each other. The others around us missed shots and missed returns, but we continued our long rally.

And then, the rally stopped. Totsuka caught the ball in his hands as it bounced towards him.

“Let’s take a short break.”

“Alright.”

We sat down together. Why the hell was he sitting next to me? Wasn’t that a bit weird? When two guys sat together, wasn’t it more normal to sit across from each other or diagonal from each other? Wasn’t he too close? Wasn’t he way too close?

“Hey, I wanted to ask Hikigaya-kun for some advice…”

Totsuka spoke with a serious look on his face.

I see. If he wanted to ask me for advice in secret, then I guess we had to be close like this. That’s why we were sitting so close, wasn’t it?

“Advice, huh…?”

“Yeah. It’s about our tennis team actually… we’re really not very good, you know? We don’t have many people either. And if all the third-years graduate by the next tournament, we’ll be in even worse shape. There are a lot of freshmen who joined but who didn’t start playing tennis until high school, so they’re not very used to it yet… and because we’re so weak we can’t get motivated either. I mean, it’s not like people need to compete for spots to play, so…”

“I see.”

That made perfect sense. Actually, that seemed like a common problem for the smaller, weaker sports teams.

Because your team wasn't very good, people didn't join. And because there weren't many people, nobody competed for a spot on the starting lineup.

Even if you took a break or skipped practice, you could play in the tournament, and as long as you were playing matches, you felt involved enough. There were definitely plenty of people who could be fully satisfied by that even if they didn't win any matches.

Those players were never going to get any better. And then, because they didn't, the team had no hope of attracting new players. And thus continued the vicious cycle.

"So… if Hikigaya-kun is okay with it, won't he consider joining the tennis team?"

"… Huh?"

Where did that come from…?

Totsuka saw the confusion in my eyes, and he seemed to shrink into himself as he sat there hugging his knees. He glanced at me once in a while with pleading eyes.

"Hikigaya-kun is good at tennis, and I think he can get better and better. I think he can motivate the others too. And… if it's with Hikigaya-kun, I think I can try harder too. U-Umm… I don't mean that in a weird way or anything! I-It's just that I want to get stronger at tennis!"

“It’s fine for you to be weak… I’ll protect you.”

“… What?”

“Ah, sorry. My bad.”

Seeing Totsuka’s lovable innocence made me say the completely wrong thing there, even though I should be trying to be serious here. But come on, he is way too cute. He was so cute that I almost ended up agreeing to join his club on the spot. I almost raised my hand with the vigor of someone charging into battle to get the last piece of cake in the cafeteria.

But no matter how cute Totsuka may be, there were some requests I just could not grant.

“… Sorry. I don’t think I can do that…”

I knew my own personality all too well.

I didn’t see any point in going to club every day, and also didn’t believe in physical activity every morning. The only people who did that were the old geezers doing tai chi in the park, right? And after all, “I really can’t go on with this~~~…” was pretty much my favorite motto.

Might have sounded I ripped that off from Korosuke,[1] the Kiteretsu character, but the point is I would definitely end up quitting the team. Even with my first part-time job, I ended up playing hooky three days in.

If someone like me joined the tennis team, I guarantee that all I would do is get Totsuka depressed.

"… I see…"

Totsuka seemed disappointed. Meanwhile, I tried to find something to say in this situation.

"Well umm… don't worry. I'll try to figure something out."

Even though I couldn't do anything.

"Thanks. I think I feel a bit better after talking with Hikigaya-kun."

Totsuka smiled at me, but I knew that his peace of mind was only temporary. At the same time, a part of me also thought that even if it was only temporary, if Totsuka felt at peace, that in and of itself was worthwhile.

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[1] He ends his sentences with "nari," which is characteristic of this particular character.

6-5

“Impossible.”

That was the first thing Yukinoshita said to me.

“Impossible, huh… But, umm-“

“The impossible is impossible.”

And I was coldly rejected once more.

This had started when I took Totsuka's words and went to Yukinoshita for advice.

My plan was to steer the conversation so that I could quit the service club and then publically announce my intention to join the tennis team. Then, little by little, I would fade out of that club as well… But now that plan was being cleanly blocked.

“I mean, I can see where Totsuka was coming from when he asked me to join the tennis team--in short, I have to scare them into being more active. If a new person joins the club, won't that eventually change things?”

“Do you really think you can survive in a group setting like that? Do you think they would readily accept a creature like you?”

“Uguu…”

True… I wouldn't exactly be praised for just quitting, but if I saw all those people lazing around during club and enjoying themselves, then I might go and start hitting them with my racquet.

Yukinoshita's short chuckle almost sounded like a sigh.

“You really don’t understand what it means to be in a group, do you? You’re a master of solitude.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from…”

Yukinoshita continued talking, completely ignoring my comeback.

“I admit that it’s possible that they will band together if presented with a common enemy such as you… But they would only make the effort required to throw you out, which will not translate into any personal improvement. Therefore, that isn’t a solution at all. I stand as evidence of that.”

“I see… Wait, you’re evidence?”

“Yes. I returned from overseas in middle school, so naturally I started at a new place, but all the girls in my class… Or, rather, all the girls in the school were desperate to drive me out. Even so, not a single person tried to better themselves to the point where they could beat me. What imbeciles…”

I could’ve sworn that I saw black flames fill the air behind Yukinoshita.

Crap, I think I just stepped on a land mine here…

“U-uh, yeah, that makes sense, I guess… I mean, if a girl's as cute as you, then that sort of thing happens…”

“…W-well, that’s true. Compared to the other girls, it’s no exaggeration to say that my looks are by far the best, and it’s not like the other girls are so weak-willed as to just lay down and give up at that, so you could say it was a natural result. That said, Yamashita-san and Shimamura-san were also pretty cute… They were pretty popular with the boys as well. But that only applied to their looks. When it came to academics, sports, artistic ability, and even etiquette and spirit, they couldn’t even hope to reach my ankles. And if turning the entire world upside down still won't be enough to beat me, then it’s natural that they would concentrate all their efforts into grabbing me by the legs and dragging me down instead…”

Yukinoshita had seemed at a loss for words for a moment, but she soon fell back into her same old rhythm and started shooting out flowery, self-aggrandizing statements one after the other.

You could say that her speech flowed like a river, but it was more like the torrents of Niagara Falls… Saying all that without missing a beat was seriously impressive.

Could it be that it was Yukinoshita’s way of hiding her embarrassment? So maybe she had her cute sides too…

Yukinoshita was catching her breath, probably because she had talked for so long. Her face was also slightly red.

“……Could you please try not to say something weird? I’m just trembling in fear.”

“Ahh, what a relief… As I thought. You’re not cute at all.”

Actually, to be honest, Totsuka was way cuter than any of the girls I knew… What the hell.

Oh, right… We were supposed to be talking about Totsuka here.

“But Totsuka should be happy if something can be done to improve the tennis team…”

As I spoke, Yukinoshita widened her eyes and stared at me.

“How unusual… Since were you the type of person to worry about others?”

“Hey, come on… This is the first time someone’s asked me for advice, so, you know…”

In the end, getting asked for help did make me somewhat happy. Plus, Totsuka was pretty cute… Without realizing it, my lips began to loosen into a smile. Yukinoshita butted in, almost as if she wanted to stop that smile.

“I’ve often been asked for love advice in the past.”

Her chest puffed out proudly as she spoke, but her expression gradually darkened.

“…Although when a girl asks for love advice, it’s usually just a strategy to tie others down.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“’If I announce who I like, then the people around me will start to be more careful, right? It’s like marking your territory. Once it's a known fact, trespassing will get you treated like a thief and thrown out. Even a guy who confesses will still get thrown out.’ Did you really need to tell me all that…?”

Black flames were burning behind Yukinoshita again. After she said "girls and love advice," I'd hoped for something really bittersweet, but that just sounded unpleasant.

Why did she have to go and trample on another one of this pure boy's dreams? Was she enjoying this?

Yukinoshita suddenly laughed wryly, as if to wash away her unpleasant memories.

"In short, don't just assume that it's a good thing to listen to every wish and try to help everyone. Isn't it an old saying? 'Even lions will throw their cubs into bottomless pits and kill them.'"[1]

"Killing them would defeat the purpose…"

Besides, the real saying is, "Even when hunting their own cubs, lions will exhaust all their strength."[2]

"So what would you do, then?"

"Me?"

---

[1] The saying implies that lions train their cubs by putting them through much hardship. Of course, the last part of Yukinoshita's version, "kill them," is not in the original saying.

[2] After much Internet searching, I've found both of these sayings floating around, along with many claims that one or both of them are actually bastardizations of older sayings dealing with lion cubs. But whatever, I don't think the etymology is very important here.

The confused Yukinoshita blinked a few times, then fell into thought.

“I suppose I would make them all run until they died, then make them practice racquet swings until they died, and then make them play practice matches until they died.”

She said all that with a bit of a smile on her face. It was seriously scary.

Then I jumped in my seat--the door had just flown open with a bang.

“Heyoo~~!!”

In complete contrast to Yukinoshita, Yuigahama entered with that happy-go-lucky, screwed-in-the-head greeting.

Yuigahama had her usual stupid grin on her face. She seemed as carefree as ever.

However, there was someone else behind her with a serious yet feeble-looking expression on his face.

His lowered eyes were devoid of confidence, and he was weakly gripping the hem of Yuigahama’s blazer. His skin was pale white. He reminded me of a faint dream, something that would disappear the minute you looked at it under the light.

“Ah… Hikigaya-kun!”

He gave me a bright smile the moment he saw me, and color seemed to return to his pale skin. When he smiled like that, I finally realized who he was. Why did he look so gloomy…?

“Totsuka…”

He slowly pitter-pattered towards me, and this time, he grabbed my sleeve tightly. Hey, hey, that’s against the rules… Though I guess he’s a guy.

“Hikigaya-kun, what are you doing here?”

“Ah, I’m a member of this club… Why are *you* here?”

“I brought a new customer with me today, fufu~~.”

Yuigahama’s pointlessly large breasts waved back and forth as she spoke proudly. I wasn’t asking you… I wanted to hear that from Totsuka’s cute lips…

“Hey, come on--I’m a part of this club too, ya know? So I thought I’d earn my keep. And Sai-chan looked like he had something on his mind, so I brought him here.”

“Yuigahama-san.”

“Yukinon, you really don’t have to thank me. As a club member, this is the least I can do--”

“Yuigahama-san, I really don’t see how you’re a club member…”

“I’m not?!”

She’s not?! That’s shocking… I thought it was pretty clear that she was slowly becoming part of the club.

“That's right. You never handed in your application letter and our advisor has not recognized your membership, so you’re not a club member.”

Yukinoshita was pointlessly strict when it came to the rules.

“I’ll write one! If you want an application letter then I’ll write you a million! Just let me join up!”

Yuigahama had tears in her eyes as she took a piece of looseleaf and began to write. “application letter”… At least capitalize it, dammit.[3]

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[3] Actually, she begins to write it in hiragana, which comes off as really informal and kind of childish.

“So, Totsuka Saika-kun… Right? What do you want from us?”

Yukinoshita ignored the hastily-writing Yuigahama and turned towards Totsuka. Totsuka began to shake as he was pinned in place by Yukinoshita’s cold stare.

“U-Umm… I want… to make the tennis team… better, I guess…?”

Totsuka was looking at Yukinoshita at first, but as the sentence progressed, he slowly turned to look towards me. Totsuka was shorter than me, so he was looking up at me as he tried to gauge my reaction.

Please don’t stare at me… My heart’s starting to race, dammit, so look somewhere else.

But just as I was thinking that, even though I’m sure she wasn’t intending to save me, Yukinoshita answered in my place.

“I don't know what Yuigahama-san told you, but the service club is not some miracle cure-all. We are here only to help and promote independence. Whether the tennis team gets better or not completely depends on you.”

“I… see…”

Totsuka shoulders drooped; he looked completely disapppointed. Yuigahama must have told him something to get his hopes up…

“Where’s that seal, where’s that seal…”[4] Yuigahama muttered as she began to rummage through her bag. I glared at her, and as she felt my stare, she looked up.

“Huh? What is it?”

“Don’t give me that… You made irresponsible false promises, and now we have to break this young man’s fragile hopes and dreams.”

Yukinoshita threw merciless words at Yuigahama, but Yuigahama just cocked her head in puzzlement.

“Hm? Hmmm? But, I mean, I thought Yukinon and Hikki would definitely be able to do something… Was I wrong?”

Yuigahama said that in a completely nonchalant tone. Depending on how you took that statement, you could almost hear a bit of a teasing challenge in it too.

And, unfortunately, there was someone here who would take it just that way.

---

[4] As in, a stamp that acts like a signature.

"……Hmph. Now you've said it, Yuigahama-san… Whether the one over there can do anything is another issue, but to think you would try to test me like this…"

Yukinoshita laughed. Ahh, it looked like some weird switch had just flipped on inside of her… Yukinoshita Yukino was the kind of person who took all challenges head-on and used all her strength to smash them to pieces--hell, she would smash them to pieces even if she wasn't provoked. She was the kind of person who would mercilessly lay into even a peace-loving Gandhi like myself.

"Well then, fine, Totsuka-kun: I will accept your request. All I have to do is help you improve your tennis ability, right?"

"Y-yes, that's right. I-if I get better, I think everyone else will try harder too."

Maybe he felt pressured by Yukinoshita's wide-eyed stare, but Totsuka was hiding behind me as he answered. His face peeked out from just slightly above my shoulder, and I saw uneasy fear in his eyes. It was almost like looking at a trembling wild rabbit… And it made me want to put him in a bunny girl costume.

Of course, when the Queen of Ice offered you her help, it was natural to feel scared. I could almost picture Yukinoshita saying something like, "I'll make you stronger, but only if you give me your soul!" Was she a witch or something?

I wanted to alleviate Totsuka's unease, so I took one step forward to protect him.

When I was close to Totsuka, I could smell the scent of shampoo and deodorant. He smelled indescribably like a high school girl… What the hell kind of shampoo was he using?

“Well, it’s fine if we help, but what are we going to do?”

“I said it already, didn’t I? Do you not remember? If you don’t trust your memory, perhaps you should consider taking notes?”

“Wait, don’t tell me you were being serious back there…”

As I thought back to when Yukinoshita was saying things about forcing people to work “until they died,” I saw Yukinoshita smile back at me… It was almost as if she was reading my thoughts. Damn was that smile scary…

Totsuka’s white skin became paler and he began to tremble.

“Am I… going to die…?”

“It’s fine. I’ll protect you.”

I said that and pat Totsuka on the shoulder. When I did that, Totsuka blushed and sent me a heated look.

“Hikigaya-kun… Are you saying that seriously?”

“Nah, sorry… I just kinda wanted to say it.”

“I’ll protect you” is in any guy's top three list of “Things I want to say.” (In case you’re curious, number one is “Leave it to me--just go on ahead.”) In any case, if I was no match for Yukinoshita, then there was no way I could protect anyone from her. It was just… If I didn’t say something to make Totsuka feel better, then his unease would never go away.

Totsuka let out a short sigh and he frowned.

“I seriously can’t understand Hikigaya-kun sometimes… but…”

“Hm, so Totsuka-kun has tennis practice after school, correct? Well then, let’s start our special training sessions during lunch break. Shall we meet on the courts?”

Yukinoshita interrupted Totsuka and began to quickly make plans for tomorrow and beyond.

“Roger~~!”

Yuigahama held out the application letter she had just finished writing as she answered. Totsuka also nodded. So… That meant…

“So… I’m going too?”

“Naturally. After all, it’s not like you have any other plans for lunch break, right?”

…Nail on the head there.

6-6

And that was how our hellish training schedule was set. It would begin the next day.

Why in the world did I have to join in?

Ultimately, wasn’t this service club just a little fenced-off garden for weaklings to gather and doze off? Wasn’t it just a club that collected worthless people and gave them a pleasant place to be for a while?

And how was any of that different from the “youth” I so despised?

Of course, Hiratsuka-sensei might be trying to turn this place into some kind of sanitarium, a place where we infected people could be isolated and treated…

…but if our illnesses could really be cured by something so trivial, then we wouldn’t be sick to begin with.

Take Yukinoshita, for example. I have no idea what sort of things were weighing on her mind, but I knew that going to the club wouldn't make them go away.

Actually, the only way a place like this could heal my wounds would be if Totsuka were a girl. Maybe if, through this tennis stuff, some kind of love comedy bloomed between us, things would be a little different…

To my knowledge, Totsuka Saika was the cutest person in the world. He was sincere, and, more importantly, he was kind to me. If we took the time and effort to nurture our love for one another, then I might mature as a human being as well.

…But, you know, Totsuka was a guy. God is an idiot.

That made me a bit depressed, but I still finished changing into my jersey. Then I headed for the tennis courts. Hey, I was still holding onto the slim chance that he was a girl. I'd stake all my hopes and dreams on that chance!

Our school jersey was a pointlessly fluorescent light blue, and it stood out a lot. The almost impressively unfashionable color scheme made every student hate those uniforms, so they never wore them except during gym or sports practices.

So everyone else wore their normal uniforms, and I was the only one there standing out like an idiot in my jersey.

That was why I was snared by an annoying person.

"Hah hah hah hah Hachiman."

“Don’t make my name part of your laughter…”

In all of Soubu High, only Zaimokuza could possibly have such a disgusting laugh. He stood, arms crossed, blocking my way.

“What a fortuitous meeting… I was on my way to deliver my new work. Come, feast your eyes! Behold!”

“Ahh, sorry… I’m a bit busy at the moment.”

I slipped to the side, lightly dodging the bundle of papers he thrust out toward me… But Zaimokuza gently caught me by the shoulder.

“…Don’t make up such sad lies. How in the world could you have plans?”

“It’s not a lie… And you’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

Why did everyone say that? Did I really look like I really had so little to do with my time? …Well, not that they were wrong…

“Hmph, Hachiman, I understand… You simply wished to act cool for a bit, and so you made a small lie. And then, to protect that lie from exposure, you lied again. But that is an endless cycle, a tragic infinite cycle of deceit. See here, Hachiman, that spiral heads nowhere.

In general, human relationships head nowhere. But there is still time to pull yourself back from that abyss! …You helped me out once before, and now I will return the favor!”

Zaimokuza's pronouncement was second place on the list of things every man wanted to say some day. The sight of him giving me a thumbs up with such a self-assured expression was annoying as hell…

“I really do have plans…”

I could literally feel an angry vein throbbing in my head, and I prepared to subdue Zaimokuza with words. But then…

“Hikigaya-kun!”

As those energetic soprano words reached me, I felt Totsuka jump into my arms.

“Great timing. Let’s go together?”

“Y-yeah, sure…”

Totsuka was wearing his racquet bag on his left shoulder, and, for some reason, his right hand had grabbed my left. What the hell…

"H-Hachiman… W-who is this…?"

Zaimokuza looked back and forth between me and Totsuka with shocked eyes. And then his facial expression gradually changed into something somehow vaguely familiar… Ah, right, was it Kabuki? I could almost hear the *Iyooo~~~ pon pon pon* Kabuki sound effects[1] as Zaimokuza's eyes widened and he struck a strange pose.

"Y-you bastard! You've betrayed me!"

"What the hell do you mean 'betray'…"

"Shut up! You half-assed playboy! You failure of a pretty boy! I was taking pity on you because you were a loner, but I see that made you all cocky!"

"'Half-assed'? 'Failure'? That's going too far…"

I was a loner though, so I couldn't deny that last bit.

Zaimokuza, still glaring at me with demonic eyes, groaned.

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[1] Kabuki theater is a very traditional form of Japanese dance-drama, often known for its colorful costumes and rather long, slow structure. This is the kind of sound effect that Hachiman is referring to. Gee, this translation comes with an accompanying audio guide too. Isn't that neat :D.

“I definitely won’t forgive you…”

“Hey, calm down, Zaimokuza. Totsuka isn’t a girl. He’s a guy… Probably.”

“D-d… D-don’t screw with me! Someone that cute can’t possibly be a guy!”

I didn’t sound very confident, and Zaimokuza shouted his response back at me.

“No, Totsuka is definitely a cute guy.”

“That’s… being called cute… it’s a bit…”

Totsuka, still standing next to me, was blushing and averting his eyes.

“Umm… Is he Hikigaya-kun’s friend?”

“That’s a good question…”

“Hmph… There’s no way I'd consider the likes of him a ‘friend.’”[2]

---

[2] The kanji written here means “strong enemy,” but the pronunciation given is “friend.”

Zaimokuza was definitely sulking. Uwahh, this guy is a pain to deal with…

But it’s not like I didn’t get where he was coming from. It was natural to feel a little sad and betrayed if you found out that a guy you thought you could sympathize with, and then he turned out to be someone with a completely different set of values.

What could I say in this kind of situation to restore our relationship? Unfortunately, given my low number of experience points in this area, I really didn’t know.

I felt a bit blue about this situation. I'd thought that Zaimokuza and I could, someday, get to a point that we could understand each other and laugh together…

But it seemed that such a thing was be impossible.

Checking on someone, trying to make people feel better, making sure you never fell out of touch, sympathizing with them, and then, by those means, finally getting closer to someone… That kind of “friendship” wasn’t friendship at all. If such annoying things were what people called “youth,” then I was completely fine without it.

Hanging out in these stagnant groups, always acting like you were having fun, was nothing short of self-gratification. That self-gratification was nothing short of self-deceit. What a despicable vice.

…I mean, look at this situation; dealing with Zaimokuza's jealousy was insanely annoying.

Once I had internally verified the rectitude of my own set of values, I pledged myself to the path of the loner.

“Totsuka, let’s go.”

I pulled Totsuka by the arm. “Ah, okay…” He responded, but he didn’t move.

“Zaimokuza-kun… Was it?”

Zaimokuza seemed at a bit of a loss, but finally gave a nod.

“If you’re Hikigaya-kun’s friend, then maybe we could… be friends too? That would… make me happy. I don’t have many guy friends…”

Totsuka said that and gave a shy smile.

“Fu… ku, ku ku ku ku. Indeed, Hachiman and I are close friends… No, we are comrades… No no no, I am the master and he is the slave… Well, when you put it like that, then I suppose I have no choice. I will… ummm… grace you with my friendship. We could even be lovers.”

“Uhh, I don’t think that’s… a good idea. Let’s just stick with friendship.”

“Hm, I see… Hey, Hachiman. You think this one here likes me? Does that mean I’m getting popular now? It does, right?”

Zaimokuza quickly drew close to me and whispered into my ear.

… As I thought: someone like Zaimokuza is no friend of mine.

Someone who would do a complete one-eighty if they thought they could get close to a pretty girl was no friend of mine.

“…Totsuka, let’s go… If we’re late, then Yukinoshita’s going to explode.”

“Hm, that wouldn’t be good at all… Then let us hasten forth. That one is… seriously scary, after all.”

Zaimokuza began to follow me and Totsuka. It seemed that he had decided to join the party… After all, if we lined up like this and walked down the hall, anyone watching from the side would think that we came right out of Dragon Quest. Or, maybe… Not Dragon Quest, but something like King Bomby from the Momotetsu series…[3]

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[3] A board game video game, which is similar to Monopoly.

6-7

By the time we got to the tennis courts, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were already there.

Yukinoshita was still wearing her uniform, but Yuigahama had changed into her jersey.

They had probably decided to eat lunch there. When they saw us, they both quickly cleared their incredibly small bento boxes.

“Well then, let’s begin.”

“I-I look forward to working with you.”

Totsuka faced Yukinoshita and gave her a small bow.

“First, we have to build up the muscle strength that Totsuka-kun is fatally lacking. Biceps, deltoids, pectorals, abdominal muscles, obliques, dorsal muscles, femoral muscles--we’ll all do pushups and build everything up… To start, please work until you’re ready to die.”

“Uwaah, Yukinon seems really smart… Wait, ready to die?”

“Yes. The more you damage the muscles, the more they try to repair themselves, but each time they do, the muscular fibers grow stronger. This is what they call ‘supercompensation.’ In other words, if you work yourself to the brink of death, then you’ll be able to power up all in one go.”

“The hell, we’re not Saiyans or something…”

“Well, you won't really be able to build muscle immediately this way, but it should also increase the speed of your basal metabolism.”

“Basal metabolism?”

I could almost see the question mark above Yuigahama’s head. Did she seriously not even know that much…? Yukinoshita seemed a bit stunned. She seemed to decide that it was better to just explain things than to pass blame around, though, so she explained it briefly.

“In short, it’s a way to make your body more fit for exercise. If your basal metabolism rate increases, then it becomes easier for you to use calories. In other words, it increases your body’s energy conversion efficiency.”

Yuigahama nodded at that explanation. Then her eyes suddenly sparkled.

“Easier to use calories… So we’d lose weight?”

“…I suppose so. You’ll be able to use calories more easily, even when you're just breathing or digesting, so you’ll get thinner without any special effort.”

Yukinoshita’s words strengthened the sparkles in Yuigahama’s eyes… For some reason, it almost seemed as if Yuigahama was now filled with even more motivation than Totsuka. Yuigahama’s new motivation also seemed to trigger something in Totsuka, who clenched his fists tight.

“L-let’s try it out then.”

“I-I’m gonna start too!”

Totsuka and Yuigahama lay down on their bellies and slowly began to do pushups.

“Nngh… Khh, fuu, hah…”

“Ooo, khh… Nnngh, hahh, hahh, nngh!”

I heard pained, labored breathing. Their faces were warped with anguish, they both broke out into a light sweat, and their cheeks were flushed. Perhaps Totsuka’s slender arms made it especially hard for him, but he occasionally sent me pleading looks. When he looked up at me like that, from that position… I dunno… It made me feel kind of strange.

Each time Yuigahama's arms bent, I caught a glimpse of the sparkling skin beyond her gym uniform's collar. Not good… I can't look at that straight on.

My pulse began to race faster and faster, to the point where you could say I was experiencing arrhythmia.

"Hachiman… What is this? For some reason, I feel completely at peace…"

"What a coincidence. I feel the same way."

As we exchanged glances and smiled, a cool voice from behind me made me feel as if I was suddenly doused with cold water.

"…How about you two exercise as well to get your minds out of the gutter?"

When I turned around, I saw Yukinoshita standing there, looking at me with a truly scornful expression. Minds out of the gutter… Did she find us out…?

"H-hm. The warrior's code demands that one never fall behind on training. I suppose I shall join in as well!"

"Y-yeah. Being out of shape is scary… You could get diabetes, or gout, or cirrhosis or something!"

We both dropped to the floor with alarming vigor and began to do pushups. As I exercised, Yukinoshita circled around to my front.

“When you do that, it almost looks like some new way of kowtowing…”

Yukinoshita chuckled.

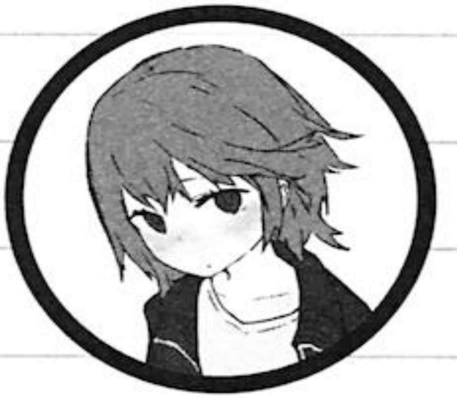
That bastard… What did she just say? Even a peace-loving person like myself might feel something awaken inside, after something that rage-inducing. Heh… Awaken what, exactly? If anything awoke, at most it'd be a new feeling of moe towards pushups…

…What in the world were we all doing?

Do you know the phrase “enough specks of dust can make a mountain”? Or maybe “three heads are better than one.” In other words, when people gather together, they become even stronger and more secure.

However, we were a group of failures who had gathered together to do pointless things.

In the end, we spent the entire lunch break doing pushups, and I spent the entire night writhing in pain from sore muscles.



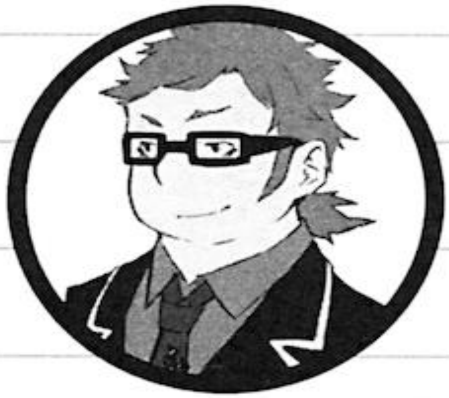
戸塚彩加
saika totsuka

Birthday:
- May 9

Special Skills:
- Tennis
- Jigsaw puzzles

Hobbies:
- Handicrafts

How do you spend your days off?
- Taking nice long baths
- Going on walks



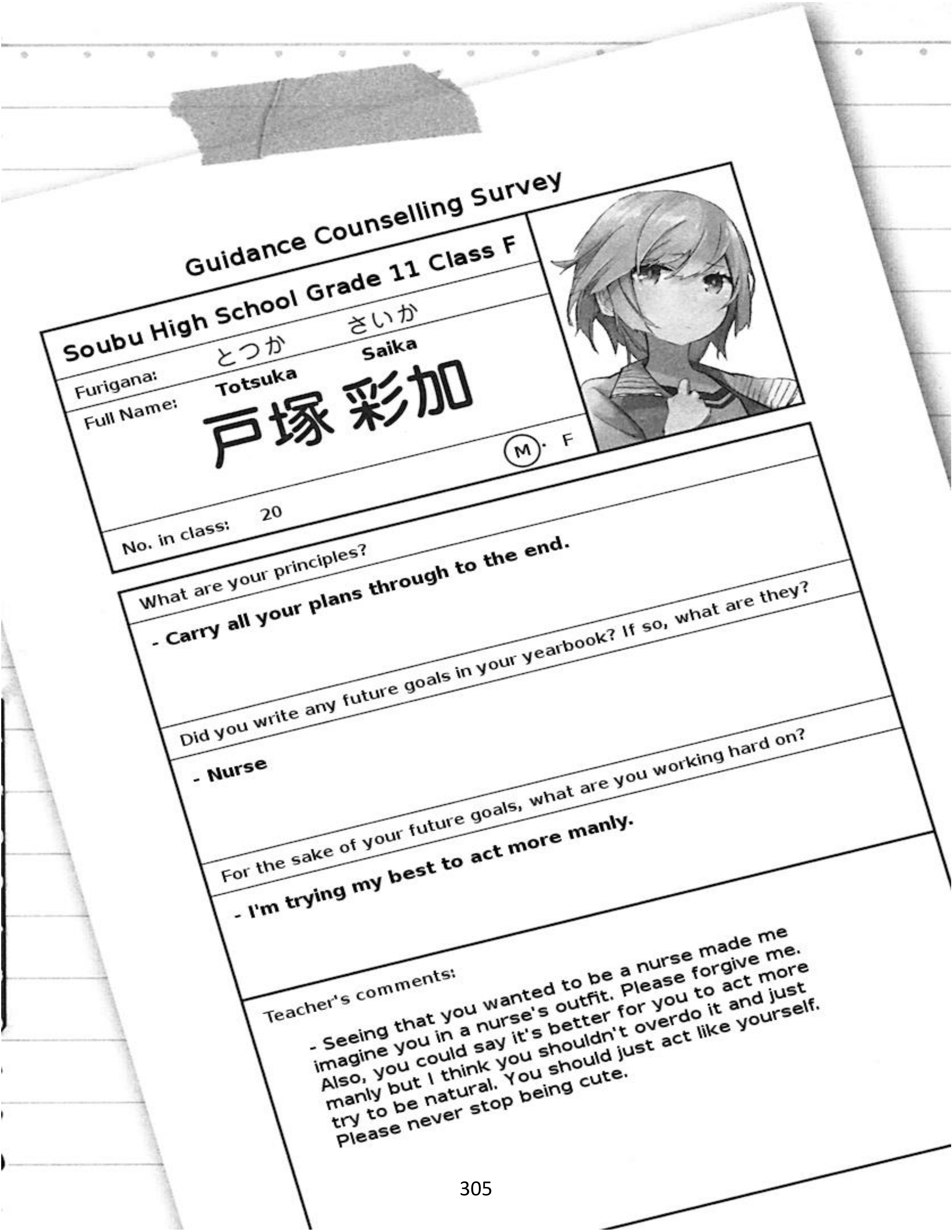
材木座義輝
yoshiteru zaimokuza

Birthday:
- November 23

Special Skills:
- Swordsmanship, writing, mental concentration

Hobbies:
- Reading (manga, light novels)
- Games (RPG, SLG, galge)
- Waching anime
- Internet

How do you spend your days off?
- Writing
- Wandering around Akihabara



Guidance Counselling Survey

Soubu High School Grade 11 Class F

Furigana: とつか さいか

Full Name: Totsuka Saika 戸塚 彩加

[✓ M]・F

No. in class: 20

What are your principles?

- Carry all your plans through to the end.

Did you write any future goals in your yearbook? If so, what are they?

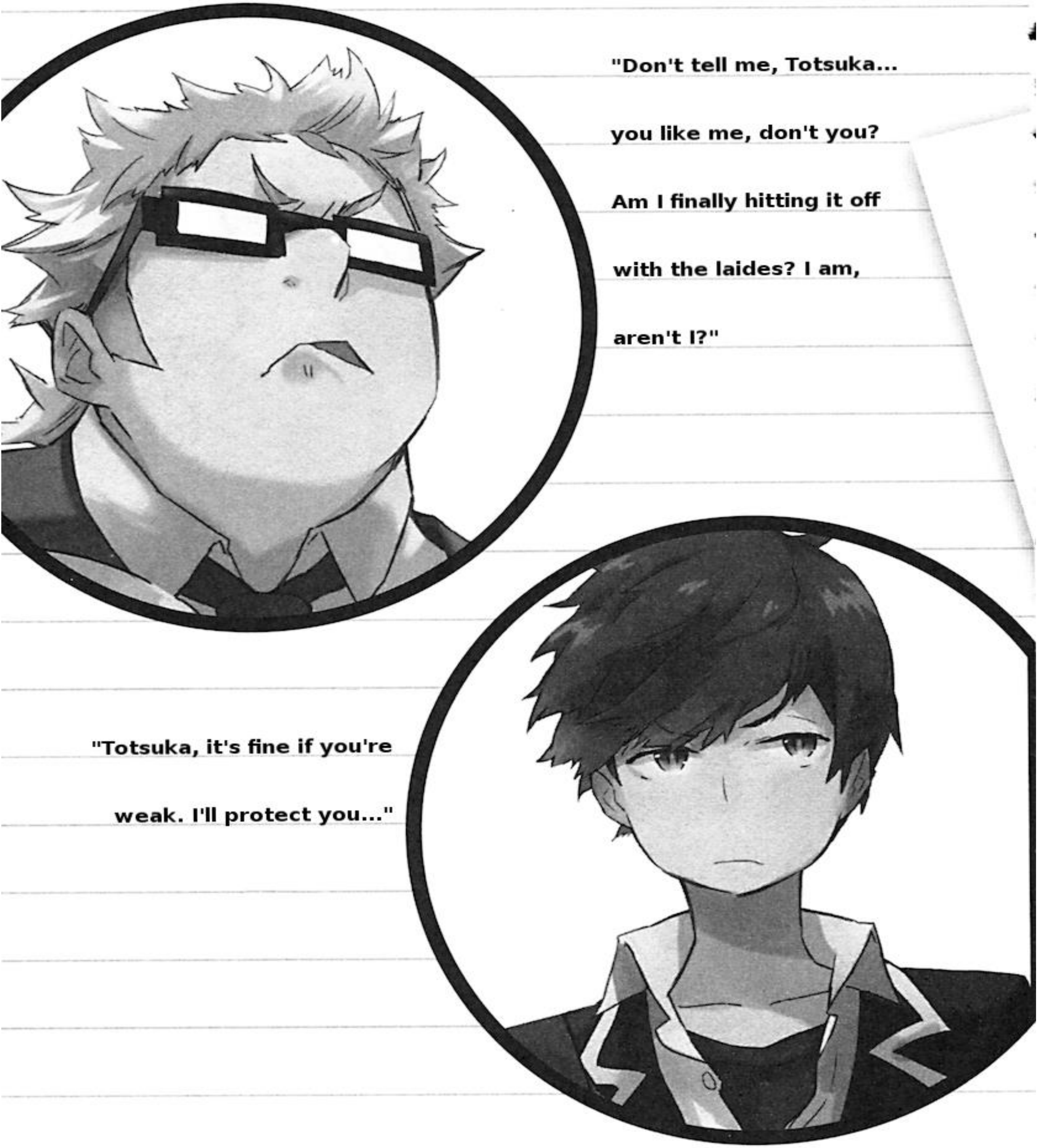
- Nurse

For the sake of your future goals, what are you working hard on?

- I'm trying my best to act more manly.

Teacher's comments:

- Seeing that you wanted to be a nurse made me imagine you in a nurse's outfit. Please forgive me. Also, you could say it's better for you to act more manly but I think you shouldn't overdo it and just try to be natural. You should just act like yourself. Please never stop being cute.



"Don't tell me, Totsuka...

you like me, don't you?

Am I finally hitting it off

with the laides? I am,

aren't I?"

"Totsuka, it's fine if you're

weak. I'll protect you..."

Chapter 7: Occasionally, the gods of romantic comedy can be kind.

And so, as the days continued, we were soon thrust into phase two of our tennis training.

That might have been a bit too dramatic. In other words, we had finished our basic training, and were finally practicing with actual equipment.

Though, when I said “we,” I really meant “Totsuka.” He was the only one who had to spend all his time rallying against the wall, as per the instructions of the demonic instructor Yukinoshita.

Well, it’s not like we could actually keep up with a tennis team member, so it was just free time for us.

Yukinoshita just sat and read books under the shade of a nearby tree, but once in a while, when she seemed to remember that Totsuka was there, she would go over to check on him and issue further commands.

Initially, Yuigahama had joined Totsuka’s practices, but she grew bored of it quickly and now spent most of her time napping next to Yukinoshita. She was like a dog someone had brought to the park, once it got tired and plopped down next to one of the park's watering holes.

And in true Zaimokuza fashion, he was earnestly working on developing his secret ultimate magic shot technique. Hey, stop throwing acorns, dammit… And stop digging up the clay court with your racquet.

In the end, there was no use in gathering this many useless people in one place.

And me, you ask?

I was lazing around in one corner of the court observing ants. It was super fun.

No, seriously, it was really fun.

I don’t know what those small things were thinking as they moved around so restlessly, but they were clearly just going on with their busy lives. I guess it made me feel like I was looking down at the street from some high-rise office in Tokyo.

Those two images, of ants and of black-suited salarymen both scurrying about, overlapped in my head.

Would I someday also become one of those black specks? Would someone else would see me from that same Tokyo high-rise? What would be on my mind at that time?

It’s not like I hated the idea of being a salaryman… Hell, a part of me even wanted to become one. That was second place on my list of things I wanted to be, right after “full-time house husband.” Number three on that list was “fire engine.” Wait, what the hell, I wanted to become a car…?

I was, naturally, well aware that there were also bad points to salaryman work. I was always amazed when I saw my dad come home with this exhausted-with-life expression on his face. I admired the way he went to work every day, even if he was unhappy.

So I suddenly projected the image of my dad onto one of those ants and began to cheer for him in my heart.

Do your best, Dad; don’t give up, Dad; don’t lose your hair, Dad.

I dreamed of my own future, and then began to worry about the future of my hair.

My prayers might have gotten through, because that ant began to walk back towards the anthill where he belonged. I’m sure the warmth of his family was waiting for him there.

I’m glad.

I was overcome with emotion, sniffling and wiping away a tear.

It was at that moment--

Whoosh!

“Daaaaad~~!!!”

There was no trace of that ant left; it and the incoming ball flew off to some far-off corner of the court.

I glared with furious eyes at the source of that ball.

“Hm, so you whip up a dust cloud to confuse your opponent and then take that opportunity to slam the ball at them… It seems my magic shot has been perfected, does it not? The earth of illusions brings forth a bountiful crop, ‘Blasting Sand Rock’!”

Zaimokuza, so it was you… What did you do to my dad (the ant version)…? Well, whatever; it was just an ant. I clapped my hands together and offered a light prayer.

Meanwhile, it seemed that Zaimokuza was immersed in the feeling of having perfected his new technique; he spun his racquet around and around before setting it on his shoulder and striking a pose. It was as if he had just gained a few experience points.d

Well, whatever--whatever to Zaimokuza, whatever to that ant.

…Maybe I should kill some time by watching whatever that cute Totsuka was doing.

When I looked ahead, I saw that Yuigahama had woken up at some point. Yukinoshita had ordered her to laboriously carry around a ball cart.

She would take balls from the cart and hurl them at Totsuka, and then Totsuka would try his utmost to get to those balls.

“Yuigahama-san, please try to throw the balls in tougher locations, like over there or there… This practice is meaningless otherwise.”

Yukinoshita was calm and collected; Totsuka, on the other hand, was breathing heavily as he chased after balls at the line and then at the net.

Yukinoshita was serious… and seriously crazy.

…No, she was just seriously trying to train Totsuka. Stop looking at me, dammit… That’s scary. How is it that you can read my mind…?

Yuigahama’s aim was completely random (to say nothing of her form), and every ball she threw went off in some completely unpredictable direction.

Totsuka would run and try to catch up to the balls, but, sometime around the twentieth ball, he finally fell to the ground.

“Uwah, Saichan! Are you okay?!”

Yuigahama stopped throwing and ran to the net. Totsuka rubbed his grazed knees, but he smiled through his tear-filled eyes and tried to assert that he was fine. What a brave fellow…

“I’m fine, so let’s keep going.”

However, Yukinoshita scowled once she heard that.

“You… still want to keep going?”

“Yeah… Everyone’s helping me, so I want to put a bit more effort in.”

“…I see. Well, Yuigahama-san, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

Yukinoshita said that, then briskly turned on her heel and disappeared back into the school building. Totsuka seemed anxious as he watched her go.

“Did I… say something to… make her angry…?”

“Nah, she’s just always like that… Actually, she didn’t call you stupid or untalented, so she might be in a pretty good mood.”

“Doesn't she only say that to Hikki?”

Nah, Yuigahama, she says those things to you pretty often… You just don’t notice.

“Maybe she just… got frustrated with me…? I haven’t gotten any better, and I can only do five pushups…”

Totsuka’s shoulders drooped as he looked down at the floor. Hm, well, I guess that wasn’t too out of character for Yukinoshita…

However…

“I don’t think that’s the case. Yukinon won't ever abandon people who come to her for help.”

Yuigahama said that as she twirled a ball round and round in her hand.

“Well, that’s true… I mean, she even tried to help Yuigahama learn to cook. There's still some hope for you, so I doubt Yukinoshita's given up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Yuigahama hurled her ball at my head. The ball scored a clean hit and made *clonk!* sort of sound. What the hell, her control was seriously good… I wouldn’t be surprised if she was picked in the next draft.

I picked up the ball that was now rolling on the floor and tossed it lightly back to Yuigahama.

“She’ll probably come back eventually, so… Shall we keep going?”

“…Okay!”

Totsuka answered energetically and went back to practicing.

For a while after that, there was not another complaint uttered, nor were there any more tears.

Totsuka was just trying his best.

“Ugh, I’m so tired~~… Hikki, switch with me.”

In fact, Yuigahama was the first one to complain…

Well, to be honest, I wasn't exactly doing much anyway.

The only other option at the moment was to watch the ants again.

…But Zaimokuza had murdered those ants, so I was completely bored now. I really had nothing to do.

“All right. We can switch.”

“Yay~~. Oh, by the way, this gets boring by the sixth throw, so be careful.”

The sixth?! That was way too fast. Was her endurance really that terrible?

As I went over to take the balls from Yuigahama, I saw her previously smiling expression turn a bit hazy and gloomy.

“Ah, someone’s playing tennis! Tennis!”

I turned around at the sound of those merry-sounding voices, and saw a large group with Hayama and Miura at the center. They were walking towards us, and as they passed by Zaimokuza, they seemed to notice me and Yuigahama.

“Ah… It’s Yui…”

A girl next to Miura spoke in a soft voice.

Miura took a single glance at me and Yuigahama, then ignored us and turned towards Totsuka. (It seemed that she hadn't ever looked at Zaimokuza.)

"Hey, Totsuka. Can we play around here too?"

"Miura-san, I'm not really… playing around… I'm practicing…"

"Huh? What? I couldn't hear you."

Totsuka had spoken very softly, so Miura hadn't seemed to hear him. He fell silent at her response, but… I mean, if someone asked me a question that way, then I would definitely also be unable to talk. She was seriously scary.

Totsuka gathered up what little courage he could find and tried again.

"I-I'm practicing…"

But Her Highness didn't seem to give a damn.

"Hmmm, but you know, there are people here who aren't on the tennis team, so… It's not like the boy's tennis team has the courts reserved, right?"

“T-that’s true… but…”

“Well, then isn’t it fine if we use them too? Why wouldn’t it be?”

“…But…”

After he said that, Totsuka seemed troubled and looked towards me… Wait, me?

Well, I guess there was no else he could turn to. Yukinoshita had gone off somewhere, Yuigahama was looking away with an uncomfortable expression on her face, and nobody cared about Zaimokuza… So I guess there was only me.

“Ah, sorry, but Totsuka asked to use this court, so we can’t let other people use it.”

“Huh? But, like I said, you’re not on the tennis team and you’re using it.”

“Ah, umm, that’s just because we’re helping Totsuka practice, so it’s, like, outsourcing, or something.”

“Huh? What are you babbling about? That’s a bit gross.”

Uwah, this girl obviously had no intention of listening to us at all… That's why I hated that kind of stupid bitch. What kind of primate didn't understand language? Even dogs understand words, for God’s sake.

“Okay, okay, let’s not get into a fight.”

Hayama cut in and tried to mediate.

“Come on, it’s more fun if everyone plays. Can’t we just do it that way?”

Hayama’s words got on my nerves. Miura had cocked the rifle, but he had pulled the trigger.

Well, I would just have to *shoot* back.[1]

“What the hell do you mean by ‘everyone’…? Is it the same ‘everyone’ you use to beg your parents for something? Like, when you go ‘But everyone else has one!’ or something…? Who the hell is that ‘everyone’…? I don’t have any friends, so I’ve never been able to use that line…”

It’s the double meaning between “shoot” and “gloom”! A miraculous combination!

---

[1] Untranslatable pun incoming. The word for “to shoot” in Japanese sounds like the word for “gloom.”

Even Hayama had to be moved by that.

“Ah, umm… I didn’t mean anything by that. Umm… I’m sorry, I guess? If you have something on your mind, then you can always come to me for advice.”

He began to comfort me with incredible speed.

Hayama was a good person… I almost felt myself start to tear up and thank him.

But…

If I could be saved by that kind of cheap sympathy, then I wouldn't need saving to begin with. If my problems just required a few kind words, then I wouldn’t really have problems.

“…Hayama, your kindness makes me happy. I know all too well now that you have a good personality. And you’re also the ace of the soccer team. And you’re also pretty good looking, aren’t you? I’m sure you can get pretty popular with the ladies!”

“W-what’s this all of a sudden…?”

Hayama was clearly shaken by my sudden flattery. Good, good, feel free to get full of yourself.

Hayama, I'll bet you don't know…

Why do you think people compliment other people? It's because the bigger you are, the harder you fall!

It's called "death by praise."

"You have so much, you are so brilliant, and yet you want to steal these tennis courts away from us who have nothing? Do you feel no shame?"

"Precisely! Mister Hayama! What you're doing is the lowest of the low! It's an invasion! Vengeance shall be mine!"[2]

At some point, Zaimokuza had come over and started spitting out flamboyant things.

"W-when the two of them stand together, then the situation just gets twice as pathetic and sad…"

Yuigahama was standing speechless next to us, and Hayama scratched his head. He let out a short sigh.

---

[2] The title of a novel by Saki Ryuuzou.

“Hm, well, hmm…”

Despite myself, a wicked grin appeared on my face. Exactly… Hayama wasn’t the kind of person who liked making trouble anywhere. And right now, that “anywhere” precisely consisted of him, Zaimokuza, and myself. If he was shot down by the majority, then Hayama would have no choice but to give this place up.

“Hey, come on, Hayato~~…”

A lazy voice slipped in from the side.

“What are you just standing there for? I want to play tennis.”

And the idiot with the curls had arrived. Was there something wrong with her brain cells? Keep up with the conversation, dammit… You’re the type of person who gets the brake and the gas pedal mixed up, aren’t you?

Indeed, Miura had pushed the gas pedal instead of the brakes.

And that gave Hayama a bit more time to think. That little pause was enough to turn the ignition key in his brain.

“Hm, all right, then let’s do this: all the people not on the team will play a match, and the ones who win will be able to use the courts during lunch break from now on. Naturally, the winners will also help Totsuka practice. It’s always better to practice with better players, right? That would be more fun for everyone.”

…What the hell was up with that completely flawless logic? Was he a genius?

“Tennis match? …Hm, that sounds really fun.”

Miura gave the kind of fierce smile that only the Queen of Fire could.

And all the hangers-on also seemed to be greatly roused by that suggestion of Hayama’s.

And so, swept away by the heat of impending battle, bowing to chaos and frenzy, we were thrust into phase three of our training.

…that might have sounded a bit too cool. In other words, we were betting the tennis courts on a match.

How the hell had it come to this…?

7-2

My earlier choice of words, with all that talk about “chaos” and “frenzy,” was me trying to be funny. In the end, though, I was right.

Quite a few people had begun to crowd around the tennis courts, which were located in one corner of the schoolyard.

If I were to count, I would say that we had two hundred people here, easy. That of course inlcuded Hayama's group, but there were plenty of other people who had come after hearing about the event.

Most of those people were Hayama’s friends or his fans. They were mostly second-years, but there were a few first-years mixed in, and I also saw a third-year here and there.

Was this guy for real…? He was more popular than our politicians.

“HA~ YA~ TO~ GO!! HA~ YA~ TO~ GO!!”

The spectators who were cheering for Hayama started to do the wave. It was like being in the middle of an idol concert… But most people here probably weren’t huge Hayama fans, they were just here to watch a strange event. …right? I’d really like to believe that…

In any case, looking at the crowd around me sent chills down my spine. It was like a religious cult… The church of youth is a scary thing indeed.

And Hayama Hayato emerged from that chaotic melting pot, confidently striding out to the center of the court. Despite the huge audience, he seemed perfectly at ease. He was probably used to that much attention. In addition to his usual followers, some girls and boys from other classes had joined him.

We'd been swallowed whole, more or less. Our glances darted back and forth and back and forth. I closed my eyes; I could feel myself growing dizzy from the ear-shattering commotion.

Hayama was already gripping his racquet and was standing on the court. He stared at us with interest, wanting to know which one of us would step up first.

(Hayama was already standing on the court, racquet in hand. He stared at us, curious, wanting to know which one of us would step up first.)

“Hey… Hikki, what should we do?”

“What should we do, huh…”

Yuigahama seemed uneasy. I took a glance at Totsuka; he looked like a frightened bunny dropped in an unfamiliar forest.

Even when he talked to me, he did so really timidly and with his feet turned inwards. Geez, that was insanely cute…

I wasn’t the only one who thought so. As Totsuka walked, looking so vulnerable, I heard girls all around us give high-pitched squeals of “Prince~~!!” or “Saichaaan~~!!”

But every time Totsuka heard one of those cries, he just trembled. Seeing that just made Totsuka’s fans writhe in pleasure and cheer even more. I couldn’t help but writhe in pleasure a bit myself.

“So I guess Totsuka can’t participate…”

Hayama had said that this match would be between people who weren’t on the team… In other words, this was a match to win the courts <i>and</i> Totsuka himself.

“…Zaimokuza, can you play tennis?”

“Leave it to me. I’ve read through all the volumes and I even went to see the *musical*, so I’m quite the expert in *el tenis.*”

“I was an idiot to ask you… And if you’re going to say tennis in Spanish, then say musical in Spanish too.”[1]

“Well then, in that case it’s up to you… Wait, how do you say ‘musical’ in Spanish?”

“Yeah, I guess I have to…”

“Do you think you have a good shot at victory? … And, seriously, how do you say ‘musical’ in Spanish?!”

“No shot at all… Also, shut up. If you can’t figure it out, then change your damn character instead. You’ve already broken character completely anyways.”

“I-I see… Hachiman, you’re pretty smart, aren’t you?”

Zaimokuza seemed seriously impressed. It seemed that I'd solved his problem, but I couldn't solve any of my own… Ugh. What should I do?

I buried my head in my crossed arms. As I did, I heard a rude, irritated voice.

“Hey, can’t you hurry it up?”

---

[1] This is really tough to translate, but Zaimokuza says “musical” in pseudo-English (i.e. English just pronounced in Japanese) while he says “tennis” in Japanese. This is strange because tennis is usually spoken in pseudo-english (as “tenisu”). To try to mimic this effect, I used Spanish instead of Japanese, but I admit the correspondence is far from perfect.

God, that bitch was annoying… I lifted my head and saw Miura holding a racquet and checking it over. Hayama also seemed to think that was unusual.

“Huh? Yumiko’s gonna play too?”

“What? Yeah, obviously… I’m the one who wanted to play tennis, remember?”

“I know, but… The other team is going to probably send out a guy. You know, that, umm… Hikitani-kun guy? Him. If you had to play him, it wouldn’t be too fair.”

Who the hell is Hikitani-kun? Hikitani-kun wasn’t playing. Hikigaya-kun was playing… probably playing.

Miura listened to Hayama's warning and fell into thought, playing with her long curly strands of hair.

“Oh, then let’s do mixed doubles! Geez, I’m pretty smart, aren’t I? But is there seriously a girl who wants to play with Hikitani-kun? Haha, that’s hilarious!”

Miura started to let out a high-pitched, vulgar laugh, and the audience began to laugh as well. I couldn’t help but laugh myself.

Ku ku ku, ku ku ku… Ugh, it hurt to admit it, but that was really effective. I could feel myself plunging into darkness.

“Hachiman, this isn’t good… You have no female friends at all, and no girl will help out a plain-looking loner bastard like you, even if you ask. What are you going to do?”

Shut up, Zaimokuza… And he was completely right, so I couldn’t even argue with him.

We were past the point where I could just go “ahahah sorry~~. Let’s just forget all about this *wink* <3.” I looked to Zaimokuza for help, but he just awkwardly looked away and started whistling badly.

I let out a sigh. That seemed to be a trigger; Yuigahama and Totsuka also sighed.

“……”

“Hikigaya-kun, sorry… If I were a girl, then I would be happy to play with you, but…”

That's definitely true. Why wasn’t Totsuka a girl? He was so cute…

“…Don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t let my own anxiety show; I just patted Totsuka on the head.

“And… You don’t have to worry about this either. If you have somewhere you belong, then you should protect that place.”

Yuigahama’s shoulders shook. She bit her lip and gave me an apologetic look.

Yuigahama had her own position in the class. Unlike me, she was actually quite good when it came to human relationships, so she still really wanted to get along with Miura and the others.

I was a loner, but that didn’t mean I was envious of the people who were doing well for themselves. It’s not like I was wishing misfortune onto them… No, really. I’m not lying.

It’s not like we were some group of friends or something; I wouldn’t call any of them my friends. We were just a mish-mash of random people who gathered (or perhaps were gathered) for some random reason.

I just had something to prove. Loners weren’t meant to be pitied--they were just as good as anybody else. I wanted to show them that.

I was well-aware that was a self-absorbed train of thought, but I was just a completely self-absorbed guy when I was alone. Hell, when I was alone I could teleport and breathe fire.

But I would not reject who I am or who I was. I would never believe that solitude was a sin or was somehow wrong.

So I would fight in order to protect my own personal sense of justice.

I began to walk out into the court alone.

“……………………………… it.”

I heard a soft, soft, extremely soft sigh that was whisked away by the buzz of the crowd.

“Huh?”

“I said, I'll do it!”

Yuigahama groaned softly while her face turned completely red.

“Yuigahama? Idiot. Are you an idiot? Just cut it out.”

“How am I an idiot?!”

“Why are you gonna do it? Are you an idiot? Or is it that you have a crush on me?”

“H… Huh? W-what are you saying? You idiot? YOU IDIIIIOOOOOTT!!”

Yuigahama went red in the face and called me an idiot over and over, looking incredibly angry. She snatched the racquet away from me and started swinging it around.

“S-S-S-Sorry! I’m sorry!”

(“S-s-s-sorry! I’m sorry!”)

I apologized immediately while somehow dodging her swings. Hearing the *whoosh* as the racquet passed really close to my ear was seriously scary… But even as I apologized, I gave her a questioning look, and Yuigahama shyly looked away.

“…Well, umm, how should I put it…? I’m also in the service club, so… it’s not strange for me to do stuff like this… It’s where I belong.”

“Wait, calm down a sec… Be more aware of what’s happening here. This isn’t the only place you belong, right? Hey, look: the girls in your usual group are glaring at you.”

“Eh, seriously?”

Yuigahama stiffened and looked over towards Hayama’s group. I could almost hear her neck creak as she slowly turned her head. I was tempted to tell her to use some WD-40 or something.[2]

The group of girls around Hayama, with Miura at their head, were looking at us. It was natural for them to do that, considering what Yuigahama had announced so loudly.

There was hostility resting in Miura's humungous eyes, eyes that were painted black with mascara and eyeliner. Her drill-like rolls of blonde hair waved from side to side unhappily. Was she Madame Butterfly or something…?[3]

“Yui, you know, if you join that side, then you’re going against us. Right?”

Miura acted like a queen, crossing her arms and tap-tapping her foot on the ground. It was the “angry queen” pose. Yuigahama felt the pressure of that pose and slowly looked down at the ground. She gripped the hem of her skirt. She might have been nervous--her hands were trembling.

The overly-curious audience began to whisper amongst themselves. It was nothing short of a public execution.

---

[2] He actually references Kure 556, a lubricating oil that stops squeaking, but I thought I would use a brand more familiar to Western audiences.

[3] A character in Ace wo Nerae!

But Yuigahama lifted her head, and firmly looked straight ahead.

"…That's… not what I want. But, club… Club is also really important to me! So I'm gonna do this."

"Hmmm… I see. Try not to embarrass yourself then."

Miura responded curtly, but I saw her start to smile. That smile burned with the fires of hell.

"Change then. I'm gonna borrow clothes from the girl's tennis team, so you come too."

Miura jerked her head toward the tennis club rooms near the courts. She was probably trying to be nice, but to me it sounded like she was saying, "I'm gonna strangle you behind the club rooms." And as Yuigahama left with her, her expression stiff, everyone around us sent her off with looks of compassion.

Well, uhh… It was nice knowing you…

"Hey, Hikitani-kun."

As I prayed for Yuigahama, Hayama spoke up to me. He must have pretty good communication skills to be talking to me… Even though he got my name wrong.

“What?”

“I don’t really know the rules for tennis here, and doubles also seems really hard. So do you mind if we just make up some simple rules?”

“Well, this is beginner’s tennis after all… Let’s just hit a few balls around and keep track of points. How’s that? It’ll be kind of like volleyball.”

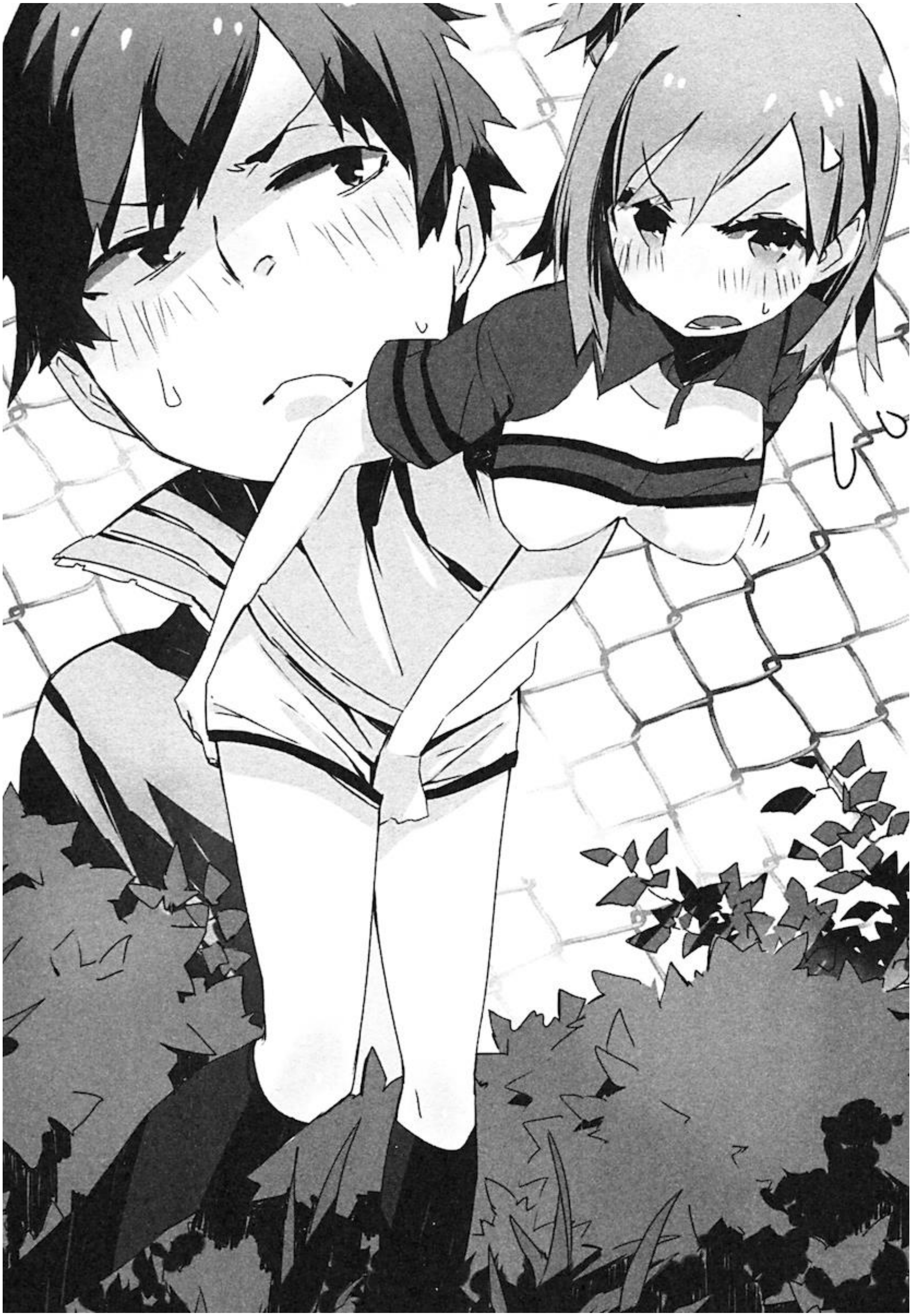
“Ah, that’s easy to understand… Sounds good.”

Hayama gave me a bright smile. I responded with an unpleasant smile.

At that point, the two girls came back.

Yuigahama was red in the face and was trying her utmost to adjust her skirt. She was also wearing a uniform polo shirt.

“This tennis uniform is a bit… Isn’t the skirt really short?”



“But you’re always wearing stuff that short…”

“Wha…?! What does that mean?! A-are you always looking at me! So gross! Gross! You’re seriously gross!”

Yuigahama glared at me fiercely, raisng her racquet above her head.

“It’s fine! I don’t look at all! I don’t notice you at all! Don’t worry! Also, don’t hit me!”

“For some reason… that's also annoying…”

Yuigahama muttered that and slowly lowered her racquet.

Zaimokuza saw and opening and interrupted with a cough.

“Hm… Hachiman. What about strategy?”

“Well, the best strategy would be to aim for the girl, right?”

A girl as dumb as that would be destroyed in an instant, right? So she was definitely the hole in their defense.

It would be much more efficient to hit to her than to have a one-on-one rally with Hayama… But once she heard the plan, Yuigahama objected in a panicked voice.

“Huh? Hikki, don’t you know? Yumiko was on the tennis team in middle school. She was picked for the prefectural team, you know?”

Once I heard that, I took a glance at Madame Butterfly (aka Yumiko). Her posture did look pretty proper, and her body’s movements also seemed very light… Zaimokuza saw that and spoke up haltingly.

“Hm, so I guess vertical rolls are no joke.”[4]

“Actually, you call that hairstyle a ‘loose light weave’…”

Whatever.

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[4] Vertical rolls, or “tate rooru,” is a hair style you often see in anime where the hair spirals in horizontal circles downwards (for a strong example, see Mami from Madoka Magica). There is also a bit of a pun here, since “no joke” in this case is “date janai.” In other words “tate rooru ha date janai.” Whee rhymes.

7-3

The match began, and sparks flew as each point proceeded in an ebb and flow of attack and defense.

When we first began, the crowd would roar and send us high-pitched shrikes, but as the match continued they would hold their breath and chase the ball with their eyes, letting out sighs of relief and shouts of joy when points ended. It was really like a pro match you would watch on television.

(When we first began, the crowd roared and shrieked, but as the match continued, they held their breath and chased the ball with their eyes, letting out sighs of relief and shouts of joy with each point scored. It was a lot like a televised pro match.)

With each long rally, with each returned point, I could feel an intense anxiety whittling away at my nerves.

In the end, that equilibrium was ruined by that vertical roll girl's serve.

Ping! I heard her racquet connect. Immediately after that, the ball flew down the court like a bullet and zoomed behind me.

What the hell was that just now…? Is it just me, or did her ball also do a vertical roll?

In other words, Madame Butterfly was a really high-level player.

“She’s insanely good…”

I couldn’t stop myself from muttering that.

“I told you.”

Yuigahama sounded strangely proud. Wasn’t she supposed to be on my side?

“You know, you haven’t gotten a hit in for a while now…”

“Ah, umm, actually… I don’t play tennis much.”

Yuigahama gave me a nervous chuckle.

“…You… You don’t play tennis but you’re here?”

“Ngh… I-I guess that was my bad!”

It’s the other way around, you idiot… You’re way too good a person. You don’t play tennis, and yet you’re here, playing in front of a crowd for Totsuka’s sake…

That’s not something that’s easy to do. It would've been insanely cool if you were also good at tennis, but life didn’t work out that way.

I was putting up a good fight with the pinpoint serve and laser-accurate return that I had tempered through all of my wall-hitting training, but as we approached the second half, the score difference grew larger and larger.

It was mostly because our opponents were focused on Yuigahama.

They might have been surprised at how well I was holding up and changed their target… Or they might have just been ignoring my existence.

“You go defend up front, Yuigahama. I’ll handle things in back.”

“Okay.”

We confirmed our basic plan of action and took our appropriate positions.

Hayama’s fast, heavy serve came flying at us. It hit the furthest corner of the court with pinpoint accuracy and tried to fly away from us. I leapt to the side and desperately tried to catch it. I held out my racquet as far as I could and just barely got to the ball. Then, using all my strength, I hit it back.

My return landed in my opponent’s court, but Madame Butterfly seemed prepared for it. As she launched it towards the opposite side of the court, I didn’t even wait to see where that ball was headed. I just dashed towards the other side of the court, where I thought she was going to hit it.

My reckless legs were still listening to what my brain was saying. I overtook the ball, and when it bounced back up, I slammed it away, aiming for the corner of the court.

However, Hayama seemed to have seen through my plan--he was waiting for my shot. He changed things up, trying a drop shot aimed right between me and Yuigahama.

I had lost my balance, so there was no way I was getting to that ball. I sent Yuigahama a pleading look, and she ran to the ball and hit it back… But it took all her strength to hit the ball, so the return ball flew high into the air, falling right where Madame Butterfly was standing.

And that ball was hammered, full-power, right back at us. Madame Butterfly had a sadistic smile on her face as the ball grazed Yuigahama’s cheek and flew off into an empty corner of the court.

“You okay?”

I didn’t go to collect the ball--I just called out to Yuigahama, who had flopped down on her behind.

“…that was super scary…”

When she heard the teary-eyed Yuigahama mutter that, Madame Butterfly seemed worried for a second.

“Yumiko, you’re terrible.”

“Wha-?! No, no! This is normal in a match! I’m not that terrible!”

“Ahh, so you’re just a huge sadist, then.”

Hayama and Madame Butterfly joked around and then smiled. The audience also seemed to follow them and smiled along.

“…Hikki, let’s win this match.”

Yuigahama stood up and picked up her racquet. “O-Ouch!” I heard her let out a small squeal.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Sorry… I think I might’ve pulled a muscle or something.”

Yuigahama gave me a shy laugh. And then her eyes filled with tears.

“If we lose… then it’s going to cause trouble for Saichan… Ah, not good, at this rate things are not going to be good… If this fails, then I don’t think just an apology is going to fix things… Ugh!”

Yuigahama bit her lip in frustration.

“Well, we’ll figure a way out of this. Worst case, we dress Zaimokuza up in women’s clothing.”

“That’ll get found out in a minute!”

“True… Well then, here’s an idea… You just stay somewhere in the court. I’ll handle the rest.”

“…How?”

“There is a forbidden technique in tennis that has been around since time immemorial. The name of that technique is: ‘My racquet has become a rocket!’”

“That’s just a foul!”

"…well, worst case scenario, I'll just get serious. If I get serious enough, then I become a master of begging for mercy and licking the soles of their feet."

"That is way too serious in completely the wrong way…"

Yuigahama seemed astounded and let out a sigh, then she smiled. Her eyes were red with tears, maybe because her pulled muscle hurt or because she had laughed herself to tears. She turned those red eyes towards me.

"Ah, Hikki is just an idiot… His personality is bad, and he's even bad when it comes to giving up. You didn't give up back then either… You dashed out like a complete idiot and called out in that desperate, gross voice… I remember it all."

"What in the world are you talking ab-"

"I think I might be just really fed up with it all…"

Yuigahama interrupted my words and spoke in an exasperated voice.

She left off with that, then turned her back to me and walked away. "Out of the way, out of the way!" she shouted as she parted the confused audience.

"…Just what was that girl talking about…?"

Left alone in the center of the court, I watched Yuigahama’s retreating back as she disappeared. Then I heard an irritating laugh echo through the area.

“What’s wrong? Fighting with your friend? Got left behind?”

“Don’t be ridiculous… I’ve never fought with anyone in my life. It’s not like I’m close enough to anyone to actually ‘fight’ with them.”

“Ehh…”

Hayama and Madame Butterfly seemed repulsed by what I said.

Hm? They were supposed to laugh there…

I see, self-deprecating humor like that only works if you're close to the other person…

Zaimokuza was the only one who was trying to hold in a laugh. I clicked my tongue and turned around, only to see Zaimokuza feign ignorance by pretending to talk to someone while he was slipping into the crowd.

…that bastard just ran away, didn’t he…? Well, in a situation like this, I would definitely also feign ignorance and run away. Totsuka was also looking at me with a sad expression on his face.

Ugh, well… Time to beg for mercy, then? I'd show them how I can be when I get serious.

To suck up to someone, you throw away your pride and suck up to them with all your might… I was proud of how well I can do that.

I was probably the only person there who felt such an unbelievable urge to get out of the stifling atmosphere… Then I heard the audience begin to buzz.

And then the wall of people smoothly began to part.

"What in the world is causing all this terrible noise?"

It was Yukinoshita--she was wearing her gym uniform and a skirt and looked quite displeased. She had a first-aid kit in one hand.

"Ah, where did you go off to…? And why are you wearing that?"

"I don't quite know… Yuigahama-san just showed up and asked me to put this on."

Yukinoshita said that and turned around, at which point Yuigahama appeared beside her. It seemed that they had swapped clothes, and she was wearing

Yukinoshita’s uniform. Where did they change? Did they do it outside?! Hmmmm…

“Losing after all this would be pretty annoying, so Yukinon is going to play for us.”

“Why do I have to do that…?”

“Well, after all, Yukinon is the most dependable friend in the world!”

Yukinoshita jumped a bit at Yuigahama’s response.

“F… riend?”

“Yup, friend.”

Yuigahama didn’t wait a second before answering. Wait a minute, that was just a bit…

“Do you really ask your friends to do annoying things like this? I get the feeling you’re just using her…”

“Eh? I can only ask friends for stuff like this. Why would you ever ask someone you don’t care about to do something important for you?”

She answered me as if that was the most natural thing in the world to say.

Ohh, so that’s how it was…

In the past, I’ve been suckered into taking up someone else’s cleaning duty because they asked me “Aren’t we friends?” so I really didn’t have any experience with Yuigahama's view on this. I see, so I really was friends with those people… As if.

Yukinoshita was probably thinking along almost exactly the same lines as me. She put a finger on her lips and thought about something.

Her suspicions were completely appropriate; I also wasn’t the type to trust people easily.

But this Yuigahama Yui was a special case. After all, she was a moron.

“Hey, she’s probably being honest. She is a moron, you know.”

As I spoke, Yukinoshita’s stiff expression loosened. She gave us her usual determined smile and brushed her hair back with one hand.

“Please don’t take me so lightly… You may not expect it, but I have quite a good eye when it comes to people. And it’s not possible that someone who can treat Hikigaya-kun and me nicely can be a bad person.”

“That’s such depressing logic…”

“But it’s the truth.”

Indeed, it was.

“I’m fine with playing some tennis, but… Could you please give me a moment?”

Yukinoshita said that and headed for Totsuka.

“You can at least treat your wounds on your own, correct?”

Totsuka looked a bit bewildered as he took the first aid box being held out to him.

“Eh, ah, yeah…”

“Yukinon, so you left just to get that… You really are kind.”

“Is that so? Even though some of the boys call me the Queen of Ice behind my back…”

“H-how did you know… Agh! Did you read my ‘List of People I Will Never Forgive’?!”

Crap. I had called Yukinoshita every single bad word in the book in that thing.

“I’m shocked. You really call me that? …well, it’s not as if I care what people think of me.”

Yukinoshita turned to face me. However, her expression wasn’t the usual cold one, but was tinted with a bit of hesitation. Her voice also gradually fell from its usual self-assuredness into something more frail, and she suddenly averted her eyes.

“…and… I don’t mind it if you think I’m your friend… either…”

I could almost hear a small *pop!* as a bit of red bled onto Yukinoshita’s cheeks. She held the racquet she had taken from Yuigahama and let us catch a glimpse of her face as she looked at the floor.

That insanely cute side of hers was enough to earn her a hug… From Yuigahama.

“Yukinon!”

“Stop… Don’t stick so close to me. It’s stifling…”

…huh? Wasn’t this the point where she was supposed to act *deredere* toward me? Was it just me, or was she only acting *deredere* toward Yuigahama? That wasn’t it, was it? Were we in a romantic comedy where the guys got together with the guys and the girls with the girls?

All the gods of romantic comedy were idiots.

After Yukinoshita managed to get Yuigahama off her, she cleared her throat a few times and continued.

“It’s incredibly regrettable that I have to team up with him, but… It seems I have no choice, correct? I’ll accept your request. So I just have to win this match?”

“Okay! …yeah, I couldn’t do much to help Hikki win.”

“Sorry for making you do this.”

I bowed my head, but Yukinoshita just looked at me coldly.

"…don't misunderstand. I'm not doing this for your sake."

"Ha ha ha, you're just such a tsundere[1]."

Ha ha ha, geez, ha ha ha ha… It's been a while since I've heard that cliché.

"Tsundere…? For some reason, that word sends shivers down my spine."

Yeah, no kidding… I guess it was obvious that Yukinoshita wouldn't know what a tsundere was… More than anything, that girl didn't lie--she would always speak the truth, no matter how cruel. So she probably wasn't lying when she said she wasn't doing this for my sake.

Well, it's not like I wanted her to like me or anything, so it was fine, yeah.

"More importantly, show me that list later. I'll look it over and touch it up for you."

---

[1] I-It's not like I'm footnoting this for you or anything! I-I just felt like it is all! Hmph! (Typesetter Note: I really am)

Yukinoshita gave me a wonderful smile, reminiscent of a flower beginning to bloom. But why was it that her smile didn't make me feel warm inside in the slightest…?

I was terrified. It was like being stared down by a tiger.

And if there was a tiger in front of me… Hmm, that meant there was a wolf behind me. Or maybe a horse.[2]

"Yukinoshita-san… Was it? Sorry in advance, but I don't go easy on anybody. You're one of those princess types, right? If you don't want to get hurt, you should go ahead and quit."

I turned around and saw Miura standing there twirling her vertical rolls even more as she looked at us with a bold smile. Miura, you idiot… Challenging Yukinoshita is a death flag…

"I'll go easy on you, so you can rest assured. I'll smash that cheap pride of yours to pieces."

Yukinoshita said that and let out an invincible smile. At least, she seemed invincible to me.

---

[2] This is a Japanese idiom, and it is similar to the English idiom "Out of the frying pan, into the fire." As for the horse, note that the first kanji in the word for "idiot" is the same kanji as horse.

She was a terrifying enemy, but it was really reassuring to have her on your side… I really pitied the people who made an enemy of her.

Hayama and Miura both readied themselves. Yukinoshita's intense smile was beautiful and cold enough to freeze you in your tracks.

“You’ve been harassing my frie-…”

Yukinoshita said that much, then blushed a bit. It was probably still a bit embarrassing for her to use that word, so she quietly shook her head back and forth before she tried again.

“…you’ve been harassing our club members long enough. Prepare yourself… You know, I may not look it, but I’m the type to hold a grudge.”

No, you definitely look it… A hundred and ten percent, you look it.

7-4

And so, all the relevant parties in this tennis battle had gathered. The match finally progressed into its bona fide final phase.

Team Hayama and Miura took the first move. Madame Butterfly aka vertical roll girl aka Miura was serving.

“Ya know, I don’t know if Yukinoshita-san knows this, but I’m really good at tennis.”

Miura said that while repeatedly throwing the tennis ball on the ground and catching it, almost like she was dribbling a basketball. Yukinoshita didn’t even budge; only her eyes waited for Miura to continue.

Miura let out a smile. That smile was completely different from the one that Yukinoshita had given before… It was the smile of a feral beast.

“Don’t blame me if a ball screws up your face.”

…Uwah, scary. That’s the first time I heard someone make that prediction.

The moment I thought that, I heard the whoosh of wind and the light sound of a ball being hit.

The ball flew rapidly towards Yukinoshita's left side and barely grazed the line to the left. Yukinoshita was right-handed so the shot was out of her reach.

"…Easy."

By the time I heard her whisper that, Yukinoshita was already ready for the return. She dug her left foot into the ground and used it as a pivot, then she spun as if she was dancing a waltz. It was a perfect backhand with her racquet held with her right hand.

Her racquet flew like a samurai sword, and the return ball flew towards Miura with a flash.

The ball hit Miura's side of the court, close to her feet, and she let out a small shriek as the ball bounced back up. That rapid return ace woke Miura up.

"I don't know if you know this, but I'm also really good at tennis."

Yukinoshita thrust her racquet out in front of her and looked coldly at Miura, almost as if she was looking at some bug. Miura took a step back, looking back at Yukinoshita with eyes filled with fear and hostility. Her lips warped a bit and she began throwing out maledictions. To make Queen Miura look like that… Yukinoshita was incredible indeed.

"…You returned that shot really well."

Yukinoshita didn’t show the slightest reaction towards Miura’s bluffing facial expression, but just aimed cleanly for one point.

“Well, her face looked exactly like the faces of the upperclassmen who used to come and harass me. It’s easy to see through the thoughts of such lowlives.”

Yukinoshita gave me a triumphant smile and then went on the offensive.

Even her defense was offensive. It wasn’t like that tired old saying, that ‘the best defense is a good offense’--her defensive play was just that aggressive. She would sink serves precisely into her opponent’s court on the return, and any balls that were hit towards her were hit back forcefully.

The crowd became intoxicated with her beautiful performance.

“Fuhahaha! My minions are all-powerful! Go, mow them down!”

Zaimokuza had caught the scent of victory and returned at some point, and now he was now completely on the bandwagon. That really pissed me off… But on the other hand, the fact that Zaimokuza was on our side meant that the tables had turned.

When it was just me and Yuigahama, we felt completely like we were playing an away game, but now the crowd was slowly coming over to Yukinoshita’s side. I mean, all the guys were sending Yukinoshita pretty heated stares.

Well, it was true that Yukinoshita was just a different species, and not many people knew her true nature. And, of course, she was also beautiful. She also had that mysterious atmosphere around her; she gave off the impression like an unattainable flower that sits at the height of a mountain peak. It wasn't really that she seemed scary, it was that she felt like some untouchable creature who one should not talk to.

Yuigahama must have a lot of courage to be able to slightly break through that barrier… and she was probably a huge idiot too.

However, her straight-laced honesty and her pure kindness were echoing in Yukinoshita’s heart. Yuigahama was the only person in the world who could've convinced Yukinoshita to come here today, and Yukinoshita was playing with all her strength for the sake of the courageous Yuigahama. She probably wouldn’t have come if I personally had asked her.

--

The huge point deficit we had built up was slowly shrinking.

As I watched Yukinoshita twirl left and right through the middle of the court, I couldn’t help but think she looked like a fairy. Her dance-like footwork was the star attraction on this particular stage. I was just filling a minor role here, and every time I tapped the ball I cringed when everyone looked at me, as if they were saying, “Not you!”

But our audience’s wishes were granted--it was Yukinoshita’s turn to serve again.

She gripped the ball tightly and then threw it high into the air. The ball almost seemed to be swallowed by the blue sky as it flew towards center court. It wasn’t going to land anywhere near Yukinoshita.

Anybody would have thought this was a miss, but then…

Yukinoshita flew.

She stepped forward with her right foot, pushed off her left foot, and then leapt when both her feet had gathered together. It was a light, staccato-like step.

And then she flew through the air gracefully. Her form was like a falcon smoothly gliding through the sky, and there was not a single person who wasn’t shaken by that vision. She was just quick and beautiful. No one even blinked as they tried to burn this sight into their memories.

A shrill sound screamed through the air, and then the ball was rolling away on the floor. The audience, me, Hayama, Miura… No one could move a muscle.

“…A… A jumping serve…”

I spoke, but I was almost at a loss for words. Seeing the nonsense that Yukinoshita had pulled off really made it impossible for me to shut my gaping mouth. We had been so far behind, but she had singlehandedly caught us back up. Even now, we were two points ahead, and if we won another point, then we would win the match.

“You really are just unbelievable. Let’s keep it up and win it easily here.”

I really believed that and made that statement, but Yukinoshita suddenly scowled.

“I would like to do that as well, but… That’s an impossible request.”

I wanted to ask why, but I saw that Hayama was getting ready to serve.

…well, whatever… It looked like we would win the next time Yukinoshita hit a return ace. I wasn’t letting my guard down, I just had faith that we would win as I prepared for the serve.

Hayama also seemed to have lost a bit of his will to play; he didn’t serve as fiercely as he had been doing. His serve was pretty fast, but it was just a normal serve, and the ball flew towards the space in between me and Yukinoshita.

“Yukinoshita.”

I thought I would leave things to her so I called her name, but I didn't get a response. Instead, I heard a flat, dull thud as the ball flew between us.

"H-hey!"

"Hikigaya-kun… Would you mind if I bragged for a little bit?"

"Huh? Also, what the hell was up with that play right there?"

Yukinoshita didn't seem to care in the least about what I had said, but just took a deep sigh and plopped herself down in the middle of the court.

"For as long as I can remember, I've always been able to do everything, so I've never kept to anything for a long time."

"What is this all of a sudden?"

"Even with tennis, there was a person who taught me the sport, but after three days I beat him. For most sports… No, not just sports, but music too, I can become quite good at anything in just three days."

"Geez, you're like the opposite of a three-day quitter[1]. And you really did just want to brag! Is there a point to all this?"

---

[1] This is apparently an idiom in Japanese. It just refers to someone who gives up very quickly on things.

"…The only thing I'm not confident in is my physical endurance."

I heard another dull thud and another ball jumped up and whizzed by Yukinoshita.

It was seriously way too late in the game to be telling me that…

Because Yukinoshita could do anything, she never stuck with anything, and she never kept doing anything. That meant her physical endurance was her fatal weak point. Now that she mentioned it, she always did just watch our lunch practices… Well, in retrospect, this might have been obvious. If you wanted to get better at something then you would practice, and the more you practiced, the more you built up your physical endurance.

But because she would do everything well from the beginning she never practiced, and so it was clear that her physical endurance would be really weak.

"Uh, do you really think you should be saying that so loudly…?"

I looked towards Hayama and Miura, and saw the Beast Queen with a ferocious smile on her face.

"Oh, but we've already heard enough~~."

Miura sent that combative statement at me. It looked as if all her troubles had been cleared away. Right next to her, Hayama also chuckled.

This was the worst possible situation… The moment after we had taken the lead, we suddenly found the game tied up in a deuce.

We were playing beginner's tennis with weird rules here. Once we got into a deuce, no team would win until one had a two point lead.

The dependable Yukinoshita had spent all her energy and was now silent. Not only that, but our opponents were well aware of our situation. We already had proof that my serve wasn't going to fly against them--they could easily return it, and that would be the end of that.

"She might have butt in on this game, but looks like it's already over, doesn't it?"

I couldn't say anything back to Miura's aggressive words. Yukinoshita was also silent… Actually, she was nodding off. She looked exhausted. What the hell, are you Hiei or something?[2]

Miura gave us an arrogant look and laughed from the bottom of her throat. It seemed that she wanted to just finish this. I felt like I was getting stared down by a snake… What the hell are you supposed to be, an anaconda or something?

Hayama sensed this dangerous atmosphere and chose to butt in.

---

[2] I assume this is a Yu Yu Hakusho reference, but never having watched the show I can't really clarify.

“N-now, now, we all tried our best… Let’s not get too serious. It was fun, so why don’t we just call it a tie?”

“Wha-? Hey, Hayato, what are you saying? It’s a match, so we need to be serious and clean up here.”

In other words, they would win the match against us and officially take the tennis courts away from Totsuka. Also, clean things up… That was scary. I wonder what she would do to me… I didn’t like this at all… Was it gonna hurt? I don’t like it when things hurt…

As I stood around, waiting, I heard someone click their tongue.

“Could you please be quiet for a moment?”

Yukinoshita did not sound happy at all as she spoke. She continued before Miura got a chance to get a word in.

“This man here will finish the match, so please lose gracefully.”

Everyone doubted their ears after she said that. Myself included, naturally… Actually, I was the most surprised one there.

Suddenly all eyes were on me. I had been nonexistent up until then, a person who people didn't want there, but suddenly I felt the value of my existence skyrocketing.

I made eye contact with Zaimokuza. Why the hell are you giving me a thumbs up?

I made eye contact with Totsuka. Why the hell are you looking at me with all that hope your eyes?

I made eye contact with Yuigahama. Stop cheering for me so loudly, dammit… It's embarrassing.

I made eye contact with Yukinos--ah, she looked away. She tossed me a ball instead.

"You know, right…? I might dish out insults and abuse, but I will never dish out falsehoods."

The wind stilled, which might be why her voice rang out so clearly.

Yeah, I know… The only liars here were myself and them.

7-5

An unnatural silence fell over the courts, with the only audible sound that of the ball bouncing against the court surface.

In the middle of that strangely tense atmosphere, I forced my consciousness deep, deep within myself.

I could do it… I could do it… I would believe in myself--no, I <i>did</i> believe in myself.

After all, there was no reason for me to lose here.

I was a man who had survived this pointless, sad, painful school life by myself, who had lived through this wretched, agonizing “youth” by myself. There was no reason for me to lose to people who had depended on a throng of other people every step of the way.

Lunch break would be ending soon.

This would usually be around the time I finished eating my lunch next to the nurse’s office across from the courts.

The memory of talking with Yuigahama there, of chatting with Totsuka there for the first time, crossed my mind.

I strained my ears.

I couldn’t hear Miura’s scornful voice; I couldn't hear the cheers coming from the audience…

But I heard that sound… That sound which I, and probably only I, had been listening to for a year.

At that moment, I hit a serve.

It was a easy, powerless, light serve that flew high into the sky.

I saw Miura joyfully dash for the ball. I saw Hayama quickly follow her. I saw the audience give looks of disappointment. I caught a glimpse of Totsuka softly looking down at the floor. I missed looking at Zaimokuza tighten his fists. I made eye contact with Yuigahama as she began to pray. And then my eyes fell on Yukinoshita’s triumphant smile.

My shot followed an unstable, uncertain path.

“Hyahhhh!!”

Miura let out a feral snake-like cry and got to where the ball was going to drop down.

At that very moment, a gust of wind blew.

Miura, you probably don’t know…

…about this special sea breeze that comes around at the end of lunch time, unique to Soubu High and its surroundings.

The ball was completely shaken and swept up by that wind. It got away from Miura and hit the edge of the court, but Hayama was running for the ball already.

Hayama, you probably don’t know…

…this wind doesn't blow just once.

I was the only one who knew about it: I, who for the entire year had sat there alone, not talking to anybody, just spending my time quietly… And that wind was the only one that knew about that tranquil time I'd spent alone.

And so that was the miracle curve ball that I, and only I, could hit.

The second gust of wind swept up the ball even as it bounced back up.

Like that, the ball fell to the ground in the very corner of the court and rolled away.

Everyone’s mouth was shut, their ears were strained, and their eyes were wide open.

“Ah, now I remember something I’ve heard… There’s a skill that allows its user to freely control the wind, ‘Wind Successor, Eulen Sylpheed!’”

Zaimokuza was the only person who didn’t get with the program and yelled out loudly.

Don't randomly assign names to that move, dammit… You’ve completely ruined the mood.

“I-impossible…”

Miura seemed completely shocked. Her muttering began to set the audience off; they buzzed softly at first, but their voices soon turned into exclamations of “Eulen Sylpheed!” “Eulen Sylpheed!” God, please don’t let that catch on…

“We failed… That sure was some miracle curve ball there.”

Hayama faced me and gave me a bright smile. He was smiling like we had been friends for years… As I was hit with that smile directly, I gripped the ball tighter and stood there, stock still.

I really didn't know how I should respond in situations like this.

So instead, I just struck up a pointless conversation.

"Hayama. Did you play baseball when you were younger?"

"Oh, yeah. I played a lot… So what?"

Hayama looked puzzled at the question I had suddenly thrown at him, but he still answered me directly. He really might be a good person…

"How many people did you play with?"

"Huh…? If you don't have the full eighteen players, then you can't play baseball."

"Yeah, that's what I thought… But, you know, I played by myself all the time."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Hayama asked me back that question, but I don’t think he’d understand even if I told him.

I didn't just mean solo baseball.

Do you people honestly know the pain of pedaling a bike alone like an idiot through swelteringly hot summers and blisteringly cold winters? All those things you distract yourselves from with complaints among yourselves--“It’s too hot, it’s too cold, this is terrible”--I got through all of them by myself.

As if you could know… As if you could understand the fear of not asking anyone about the content on an upcoming test, and instead just studying silently alone and then facing the consequences directly later. You lot have come this far by checking answers with each other, by comparing test scores, by calling each other idiots or overachievers and escaping from reality, while I’ve faced that reality head on.

How do you like that? Don’t I seem like the strongest?

Swept away by those emotions, I prepared to serve the ball.

I bent one leg in front of me and drew the other one taut, tightening my body like a fully drawn bow. Then I tossed the ball high in the air. I gripped my racquet tightly with both hands and rested it on the back of my neck.

The blue sky, the departing spring, and the oncoming summer… I'd take all those things and send them to hell.

“Adolescence, GO SCREW YOURSELF!!!”

With all my might, as the ball fell towards me, I hit the ball up into the air with an upper swing.

The ball made a *crack!* as it connected right on the hard frame of my racquet and flew up into the air, being swallowed by the blue sky.

The ball kept on rising and rising. At one point, the ball just looked like a speck smaller than a distant grain of rice.

“T-That is… The spirit of destruction which soars through the heavens, Meteor Strike!”

Zaimokuza leaned forwards and shouted that loudly. Again, why the hell are you naming my tennis shots?

“Meteor Strike…” The other people in the audience also began to whisper that. Seriously, why are you guys agreeing with him?!

It really wasn’t a big deal… It was just a game of bat and catch.

Let me explain: When I was a kid, I didn’t have many friends, and so I invented the new sport of one-player baseball--I would throw the ball by myself, hit it by myself, and catch it by myself. When I tried to devise a scheme to make the game last as long as possible, I realized that super bat-and-catch was the best way to lengthen the game.

If I caught the ball then the batter was out, and if I missed the ball at first but caught it on one bounce it was a hit. If I hit the ball way too far off, I counted it as a home run. The one weak point of this game was that once I decided to root for one side (either the batter or the catcher), then the game would get completely one-sided. To play this game, it was important to be as objective as if I were playing rock paper scissors with myself. Boys and girls, please don’t learn from me; play baseball with your friends.

But that was the symbol of my isolation, and it was also my strongest weapon.

It was the hammer that would fall down from the void and crush those fools who glorified youth.

“W-what the hell is that?”

Miura looked up at the sky in bewilderment. Hayama also stared up at the bright sky, but his expression suddenly became panicked and he shouted.

“Yumiko! Get back!”

Hayama yelled at Miura, who was now standing stock still with a look of shock still on her face. As expected, Hayama had realized what was going on… But he was too late.

The tennis ball continued to go up and up but gradually lost speed under the influence of gravity, until the two forces balanced out and it stopped.

And then, when that balance was broken, the ball’s potential energy converted into kinetic energy. The ball began to freefall. Upon impact, that energy would explode.

After its long, long trip through the sky, the ball whipped up a cloud of dust and once again soared back into the air.

Miura chased the ball through that dust cloud with uncertain steps, trying to hit it. The ball flew unsteadily towards the wire mesh fence in the back of the court.

Oh, crap… Miura was going to crash right into the fence.

“Ugh!”

Hayama tossed his racquet away and ran for Miura.

Would he make it?! Would he not make it?!

The two of them disappeared momentarily from view in that cloud of dust.

There was a moment of sheer silence.

I heard the sound of someone gulping… In fact, it might have been me.

And then, the cloud of dust dispersed, and the two of them came back into view.

Hayama's back had crashed into the fence; he was hugging Miura to protect her. Miura had a blush on her face as she snugly gripped onto Hayama’s shirt.

In the next moment, the audience erupted into loud cheers and thunderous applause. It was a full-participation standing ovation.

Hayama was comfortingly stroking Miura’s head, and Miura’s face was getting redder and redder.

Still cheering, the audience surrounded Hayama and Miura.

“HA~ YA~ TO~ GO!! HA~ YA~ TO~ GO!!”

In place of a celebratory fanfare, the bell rang to signal the end of lunch break. It seriously felt like we were headed for a kiss scene and then the ending credits.

In the end, everyone was enveloped by a certain feeling of accomplishment and exhaustion, like they had just finished watching some feel-good epic or finished reading some superb youth romantic comedy.

And like that, with shouts of “hip hip hooray!” the students lifted them into the air and disappeared off into the school building.

FIN.

Oh, what the hell.

7-6

Soon, we were the only ones left on the court.

“I suppose you could say we won the battle but lost the war?”

Yukinoshita sounded pretty apathetic, but I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t be ridiculous… I wasn’t a match for them from the very beginning.”

Those who celebrated youth were always the ones in the spotlight.

“Yeah, that’s true… It only turned out like this because Hikki is here. Getting ignored even though you won… That’s just too sad.”

“Hey, Yuigahama, be careful what you say. You should realize that sometimes your honest feelings can hurt people more than words filled with ill will.”

I gave Yuigahama a scornful look but she didn’t seem apologetic at all.

Well, I guess everything she said was true, so she had no real reason to feel apologetic. From the very beginning, Hayama and Miura didn’t really care about the competition or the match or anything like that.

I was amazed that they were able to take a miserable defeat and turn it into just another treasured page of their beautiful youth.

What the hell was that? Youth, just go blow yourself up, dammit…

“Ugh, dammit, what the hell is up with Hayama… If I was born and raised differently then I could’ve been like that too, dammit…”

“In that case, then wouldn’t you just be a completely different person…? Well, it’s certainly true that you might need a full reset.”

Yukinoshita gave me a cold look even as she used a roundabout way to tell me to go die.

“…b-but, I mean, umm… I guess I’m glad it was Hikki, or, umm… Well, it wasn’t a bad thing, umm…”

Yuigahama mumbled something inside her mouth. I couldn’t hear her at all. Try to speak clearly, please… You remind me of myself in a clothing shop when a shop attendant tries to talk to me.

However, Yukinoshita did seem to hear what Yuigahama had said; she smiled faintly before giving a quiet nod.

“Well, there are a few people who have been saved by your twisted way of doing things… Unfortunately.”

Yukinoshita said that and then suddenly looked somewhere else. When I followed her gaze, I saw Totsuka walking over slowly while being careful of his grazed knees. Zaimokuza was also following him over like some creepy stalker.

“Hachiman, well done… As expected from my partner. But, unfortunately, there may come a day when we must settle things once and for all…”

For some reason, Zaimokuza went glassy-eyed and began talking with himself. I ignored him and spoke up to Totsuka.

“Are your knees okay?”

“Yeah…”

At that point, I suddenly realized that I only had guys around me. Maybe it was because Zaimokuza had shown up, but Yuinoshita and Yuigahama had both disappeared at some point.

Hayama was able to get girls to dote on him like he was James Bond, but here I am surrounded by guys. So he gets the James Bond ending, and I get the A-Team ending… What the hell was up with that imbalance?

Romantic comedies are just urban legends.

“Hikigaya-kun… Umm, thank you.”

Totsuka stood right in front of me and stared directly at me. He said that, then seemed embarrassed and averted his gaze. From this position, I almost wanted to hug him and give him a kiss, but then I remembered he was a guy…

This romantic comedy was all wrong, and so was Totsuka’s gender. Also, Totsuka had thanked the wrong person.

“I didn’t really do anything. If you want to thank someone, then you should thank those guys...”

I tried to find the people I was talking about and looked around. When I did, I saw a pair of twin-tails unsteadily swaying back and forth by the side of the tennis clubroom.

So that’s where they were?

I headed over to the clubroom, thinking that I would at least thank them.

“Yukinoshi… Ah.”

She was completely in the middle of changing.

The front of her blouse was open, and I could catch brief glimpses of her light lime-green bra. She still had her skirt on, but that sense of unbalance just served to further accentuate her well-proportioned, slender body.

“W… Wha wha wha-“

Ugh, why are you being so noisy when I’m trying to concentrate and carve this into my memory? Oh, Yuigahama, you were here too.

She was also completely in the middle of changing.

It seemed that she was the type of person who buttoned up from the bottom. Her shirt was wide open, and her pink bra and cleavage were peeking through. She was holding holding onto a skirt with one hand and holding it out to Yukinoshita… Well, in short, she wasn’t wearing a skirt.

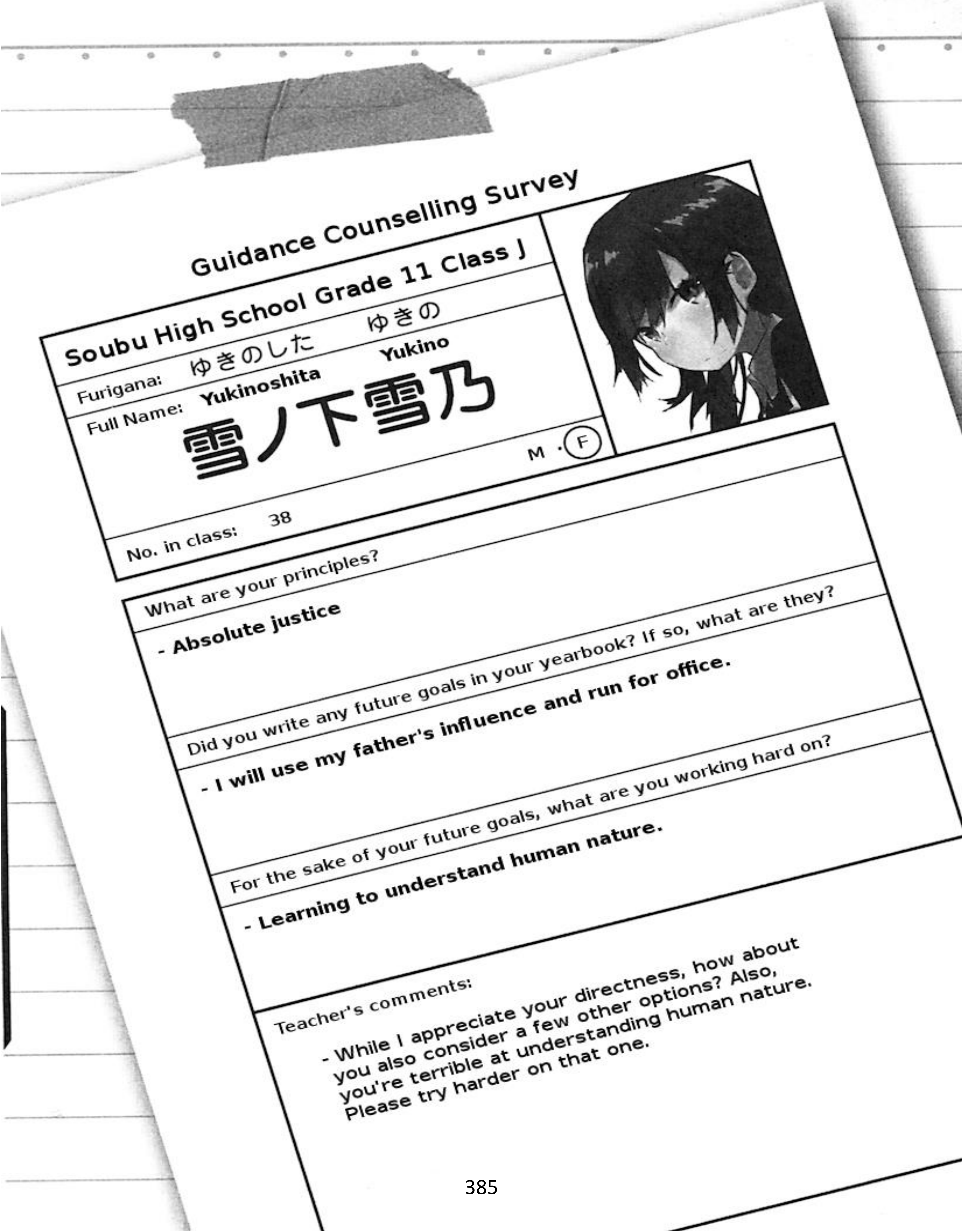
A well-proportioned butt extended out of her matching pink underwear, and her lower legs were covered by dark blue high socks.

“Seriously, go die!”

Wham! She hit me full-force in the face with her racquet.

…ahh, yes, *this* was more like a romantic comedy.

Great job, romantic comedy gods. *Sob*.



Guidance Counselling Survey

Soubu High School Grade 11 Class J

Furigana: ゆきのした　ゆきの

Full Name: Yukinoshita Yukino

雪ノ下雪乃

M [✓ F]

No. in class: 38

What are your principles?

- Absolute justice

Did you write any future goals in your yearbook? If so, what are they?

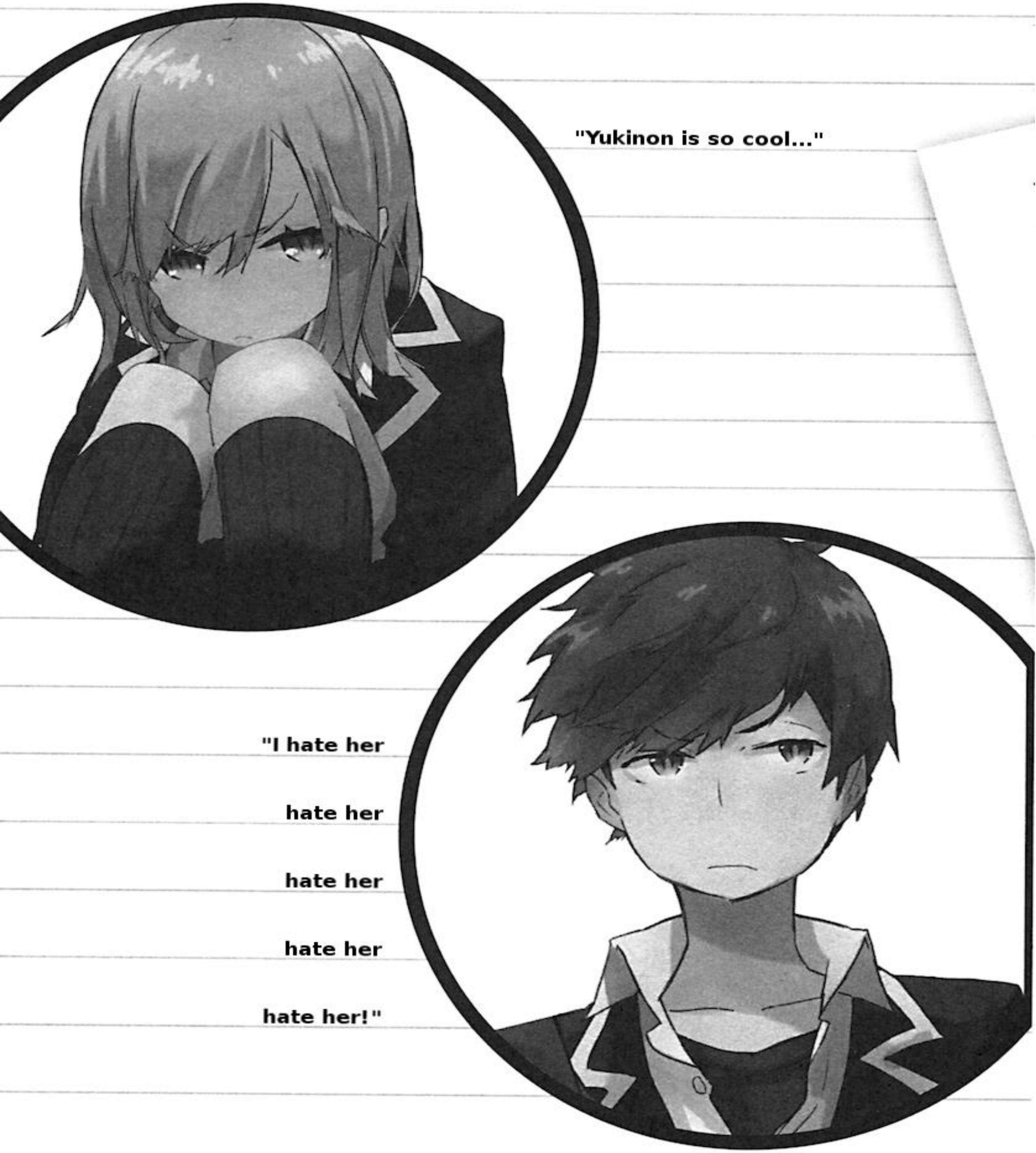
- I will use my father's influence and run for office.

For the sake of your future goals, what are you working hard on?

- Learning to understand human nature.

Teacher's comments:

- While I appreciate your directness, how about you also consider a few other options? Also, you're terrible at understanding human nature. Please try harder on that one.


"Yukinon is so cool..."
"I hate her
hate her
hate her
hate her
hate her!"

Chapter 8: And then, Hikigaya Hachiman thinks.

Youth.

It is just one simple word, and yet it is a word which so fiercely moves the human heart. It gives mature, independent adults a sense of bittersweet nostalgia, it gives young maidens a sense of eternal longing, and it gives people like me a sense of intense jealousy and hatred.

My own high school life has not been the Garden of Eden I described before. It is an ashen, gloomy, monochrome world. On that first school day, when I had that traffic accident, my school life became gloomy indeed. After that, I would just go between my house and school, and during holidays I would just go to the library. I really have passed my days living a life that is very far from the typical high school dream life. In my world, romantic comedies don't exist at all.

However, I don't have an ounce of regret. In fact, you could even say I am quite proud of myself.

Going to the library and finishing those super long fantasy novels… Turning on the radio at night and becoming entranced by a radio personality's way of telling a story… Finding heartwarming passages in a vast electronic sea dominated by text… All of these things were made possible precisely because I have lived that kind of life.

I am grateful for, I am moved by, each and every one of those discoveries and chance meetings. There were tears too, but they were not tears of grief.

I will never reject the time I have spent, that one year of high school “youth” that I have lived. No, I will accept it with all my heart. And that conviction will definitely not change, today or tomorrow.

However, I want to make this clear: even so, I will not reject the way of life of everyone else. I will not reject the way of the people who celebrate youth.

For those people who are in the prime of their youth, even failures can be changed into wonderful memories. Even quarrels, strife, and troubles can become just another moment of their youth.

The world changes when viewed through the youth filter that these people possess.

In that case, perhaps my own youth can be tinged with the color of romantic comedy. Perhaps it isn’t all wrong.

And perhaps, someday, I will also see brightness in the place where I am, even if I see that brightness through the glassy eyes of a dead fish. I can feel, growing inside of me, something that allows me to at least hope that something like that will happen.

Indeed, there was one thing I have learned in the days I have spent with the service club.

My conclusion is this:

-

With that, I stopped the pen in my hand.

I gave a nice, long stretch. I was the only person left here, in this classroom, after school.

It’s not like I was being bullied or anything… I was just rewriting that essay, the one that Hiratsuka-sensei had assigned us. I’m being honest here, okay? I’m really not being bullied, okay?

My rewrite was going very smoothly, but I got a bit stuck on the conclusion, so it ended up getting pretty late in the day.

Maybe I should continue this in the clubroom…

As I thought that, I quickly tossed my grid paper[1] and writing tools into my bag and left that empty classroom behind.

There was no one in the hallway leading down to the special building, though I could hear the energetic shouts of the sports teams practicing outside.

Yukinoshita was probably in the clubroom reading again… In that case, I could just continue writing there without being bothered by anyone.

At any rate, we did absolutely nothing in that club.

Very, *very* occasionally, there was some strange person who came to us, but that was rare; most people would rather go to someone familiar, someone who they trusted, or they'd just keep their troubles to themselves and deal with it that way.

That was probably the right answer. That what people should, in general, aspire towards. However, occasionally there are people who can't do that, people like me, or Yukinoshita, or Yuigahama, or Zaimokuza.

For most people, things like friendship or love or dreams are wonderful. Even moments when you are troubled or don’t know what to do can be completely turned around and seen in positive lights.

---

[1] Paper that is separated into squares so each square can be filled with a kanji.

Indeed, that is what we call “youth.”

However, there are also the curmudgeons who look at those people and conclude that they are intoxicated with the idea of “youth” and just do whatever they want. As my sister would say, “‘Youth’? What’s that? Some kind of fruit?” No, that would be “yuzu.” You watch way too much Shouten, don’t you?[2]

---

[2] I localized this pun so it would actually make sense. In the text, this was presented as a misunderstanding between the words youth (seishun) and galaxy (seiun). Shouten is a comedy show where comedians compete to see who can make the best joke on a certain topic.

8-2

When I opened the clubroom door, I saw Yukinoshita reading a book in her usual place.

She heard the sound of the door creaking and lifted her head.

“Oh my… I thought you weren’t coming today.”

She placed a bookmark in her book. Compared to my first days here, when she would just completely ignore me and keep reading, we'd made quite a bit of progress.

“Oh, yeah… I also thought that I'd be taking today off, but there’s still something I want to do.”

I pulled out the chair diagonally across from Yukinoshita and took my seat. That was our usual positioning. I took out the grid paper from my bag and laid it out. Yukinoshita, who was watching me closely, did not look pleased.

“…just what do you think this classroom is here for?”

“You’re just reading a book, though…”

Yukinoshita looked away, seeming a bit embarrassed. It seemed that nobody had come to the club for help today either. The only sound in that quiet classroom was the *tick-tock* of the clock. When I thought about it, I realized that it'd been a while since it was so quiet… Probably because of a certain noisy existence.

“What’s Yuigahama doing?”

“It seems she’s gone off with Miura-san and the others today.”

“I see……”

That was a surprise… or maybe it wasn’t. They *were* friends, and ever since that tennis match, I'd gotten the feeling that Miura had started to act more gently. That might've been because Yuigahama was finally able to speak her mind clearly.

“I’d ask you the same question, Hikigaya-kun. You aren’t with your partner today?”

“Totsuka is at practice. It might be because of that special training, but he’s been really fired up about practice lately…”

Which meant I didn’t hang out with him much. That fact made me very sad.

“Not Totsuka-kun, the other one.”

"……who?"

"Who, you say… You know, the one who's always lurking in your shadow."

"Hey, stop saying scary things… Don't tell me you can see ghosts or something?"

"…*sigh*, don't be ridiculous… There is no such thing as ghosts."

Yukinoshita sighed and gave me a look that said "Maybe I'll turn *you* into a ghost"… Ah, it's been a while since I've talked like this with Yukinoshita.

"I mean *that person*. Za… Zai… Zaitsu-kun? Something like that…"

"Ahh, Zaimokuza? He's not my partner though."

Hell, I don't know if I'd even call him a friend.

"He told me 'I'm in a big time crunch right now… Sorry, but I have to prioritize my deadlines for today' and he went home first."

"He sure *talks* like a hit novelist…"

Yukinoshita mumbled with a clearly disgusted expression on her face.

Come on, come on, at least show some sympathy for me--I'm the one who has to read his stuff. He doesn’t even write it out, he just brings me the drawings and plot, you know? “Hey, Hachiman! I thought of a pretty cool new idea! The heroine is made of rubber and the sub-heroine has the power to cancel out the heroine’s power! This is gonna be a big hit!” You idiot. That’s not a cool idea, that’s crap. Isn’t that a complete ripoff?

But, well, in the end, that lukewarm community only lasted a little while, and we eventually all migrated back to where we belonged. So you could say that group was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence.

But if you asked me if this was where Yukinoshita and I belonged, then I guess I would probably say that it wasn’t really.

Our intermittent conversation wandered aimlessly in the usual (slightly awkward) atmosphere.

“I’m coming in.”

The door suddenly flew open.

“……*sigh.*”

Yukinoshita lightly placed one hand on her forehead and sighed. She seemed resigned. I see… When you were in such a quiet space and the door suddenly opened like that, then you did start wanting to hurl insults around…

“Hiratsuka-sensei… Please knock when you want to come in.”

“Hm? Isn’t that usually Yukinoshita's line?”

Hiratsuka-sensei seemed a bit puzzled, but she pulled out a nearby chair and sat herself down.

“Do you want something?”

As Yukinoshita asked her question, Hiratsuka-sensei’s eyes started sparkling in their usual boyish way.

“I wanted to make a mid-game announcement!”

“Ahh, that…”

I'd completely forgotten… Actually, I didn’t remember ever settling anything, so it’s only natural that I forgot.

“The battle results currently stand at two victories each, so it's a tie. Yes, close battles are the soul of a battle manga… Personally, though, I would've liked to see Yukinoshita awaken after getting over the death of Hikigaya…”

“I died? How did it get to that point…? Umm, and, two victories each? I don’t remember settling anything, and we’ve only had three people come to us for help.”

Did she just not know how to count?

“By my count, there’ve been four people. You heard me, right? I’ll decide everything by my own judgment.”

“When you play by such arbitrary rules, it’s actually a bit refreshing…”

Is she supposed to be Gian or something?[1]

“Hiratsuka-sensei… Would you please explain the reasoning behind your count? As that one over there was shouting, we haven’t actually settled any of the problems that people brought to us.”

“Hm…”

---

[1] The bully from Doraemon.

Hiratsuka-sensei fell into silence and thought for a bit.

“Well, let’s see… If you take the kanji for ‘problems’[2], the radical for ‘heart’ is on the left and the kanji for *wicked* is next to it. And the kanji for *wicked* has a lid on it.”[3]

“Hello middle schooler, shouldn’t you be getting back to class?”[4]

“What I mean is that your true troubles lie to the side of your heart, and so the things people come to you with when they seek advice may not be their true troubles.”

“What was the point of all that explanation before you made that point?”

“It’s not like you were being that clever there.”

Yukinoshita and I both mercilessly cut her down, and Hiratsuka-sensei seemed a bit sad.

“I see… I tried hard to think that up too…”

---

[2] “Troubles” here is the kanji 悩. It has the heart radical on the left.

[3] On the bottom right of 悩 is 凶, which means wicked.

[4] Literally, “what class B did you come from?” But I translated the intent.

Well, in other words, the winner and loser of this game would be just as arbitrary. Hiratsuka-sensei looked back and forth between me and Yukinoshita and seemed to sulk a bit.

“Ugh… You two only work together to attack someone else… It’s like your old friends or something.”

“What in the world… I don’t recall ever becoming friends with that man.”

Yukinoshita shrugged her shoulders. I was sure she was giving me a sideways glare, but then I saw that she wasn’t even looking at me.

“Hikigaya, don’t be so down… They say that there are bugs that even like to eat weeds. It’s all a matter of taste.”

Sensei tried to comfort me. I wasn't feeling down at all, dammit… And why did that kindness just feel painful…?

“Indeed…”

To my surprise, Yukinoshita also seemed to join in… Wait, she was the one who depressed me in the first place.

However, Yukinoshita only told the truth; she wouldn’t lie about her own feelings, so she probably truly believed Hiratsuka-sensei’s words. She gave me a kind smile.

“I’m sure there is some insect somewhere who will, one day, come to like Hikigaya-kun.”

“At least pick a cuter animal, dammit!”

It was pretty humble, even for me, not to ask her to pick a human instead… But that arrogant Yukinoshita clenched her fist, looking pretty proud of herself.

Perhaps she was really that happy with what she had said, but her eyes were sparkling; she really looked like she was enjoying herself.

I, on the other hand, didn’t find it fun at all. I mean, weren't talks with girls supposed to be more hah-hah-he-he-lovey-dovey cutesy? Wasn’t this completely weird?

I thought I would write down what I was feeling at that moment, so I gripped my pen. Yukinoshita looked over at what I was doing.

“Actually, what have you been writing all this time?”

“Shut up, it’s nothing.”

And then, I scribbled down the final sentence in my assignment:

-

As expected, my youth romantic comedy is screwed up.

Afteword

It’s been a while. This is Watari Wataru. Also, nice to meet you. This is Watari Wataru.

This may seem sudden, but the “youth” that is commonly referred to by the world at large is a mistaken notion. It’s a downright lie. Going on a date at Lalaport[1] in your uniforms with a cute girl, getting invited by a friend to another school to eat lunch with a girl… those things just don’t exist. Those things were works of complete fiction.

Haven’t you ever read a youth romantic comedy and seen the following disclaimer at the end?

**This work is a work of fiction, and has no relation with real matters, people, or organizations.*

In other words, that youth romantic comedy was filled with lies. And everyone is getting tricked.

Real youth was getting off school with just a guy friend, parking yourself at a Saizeriya[2] and squatting there until night while surviving on only drinks and focaccia.

---

[1] Shopping mall in Tokyo.

[2] An Italian chain restaurant popular in Japan. Think Olive Garden, but Japanese.

And all you do with him is say bad things about your classmates and complain about school. *That* was the true picture of youth. I'm speaking from experience here, so I'm pretty sure about it.

But, at the same time, I don't really hate that kind of youth.

Getting excited about mixing together melon soda and orange juice and calling it "melange"… going on a field trip and playing mahjong with three other guys in the midst of that savage environment… falling into silence after seeing that girl I liked flirting with her boyfriend… now that I think back on those times, I could call each and every one of those fond memories.

Sorry, that was a lie. I hated that kind of youth. I wanted to go on a date with a girl in my uniform too. Hell, I still want to.

Those are the things I was feeling as I wrote this book. I hope you enjoyed it.

Last, I need to give out thanks to a few people.

First, my manager Hoshino-sama. I could write an entire book about how he helped out, so I'll just keep it short and said that he looked after me in everything I did, from the smallest to the largest of tasks. Thank you very much.

Then, Ponkan(8)-sama. Every time I was feeling discouraged, your incredibly cute illustrations gave me strength. I'm really, sincerely happy I asked you to help me out. Thank you very much.

Even though we didn't really know each other, I'd like to thank Hirasaka Yomi-sama for his comment that I put on this book's obi.[3] When I was close to breaking from unease and worry, his words gave me courage. Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank my friends. Every time I met you guys all you talked about was money! I was so depressed! Talk a bit more about what's been going on in your lives, geez!

I'd like to thank all the readers. It is precisely thanks to you all that the novelist Watari Wataru can exist. All of your words were a source of constant encouragement to me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you very much.

And last, I'd like to thank the past me from high school. You might have been called boring and worthless that one day, but because those sour words were spat out at you this novel was born. Please be proud. Your youth might have been screwed up, but it was also definitely correct. Thank you very much.

Now then, this story. Whether it's continued or not depends on a few things, but I sincerely believe that we will meet again. So while I mull over the plot for next time, please allow me to lay down my pen for this volume.

---

[3] The obi is a strip of paper that is wrapped around the bottom of Japanese novels. And the person he is referring to is the author of Haganai.

Afterword

A certain day in February, from a certain place in Chiba Prefecture, while feeling nostalgic about my past long ago and sipping a cup of sweet coffee,

-Watari Wataru

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